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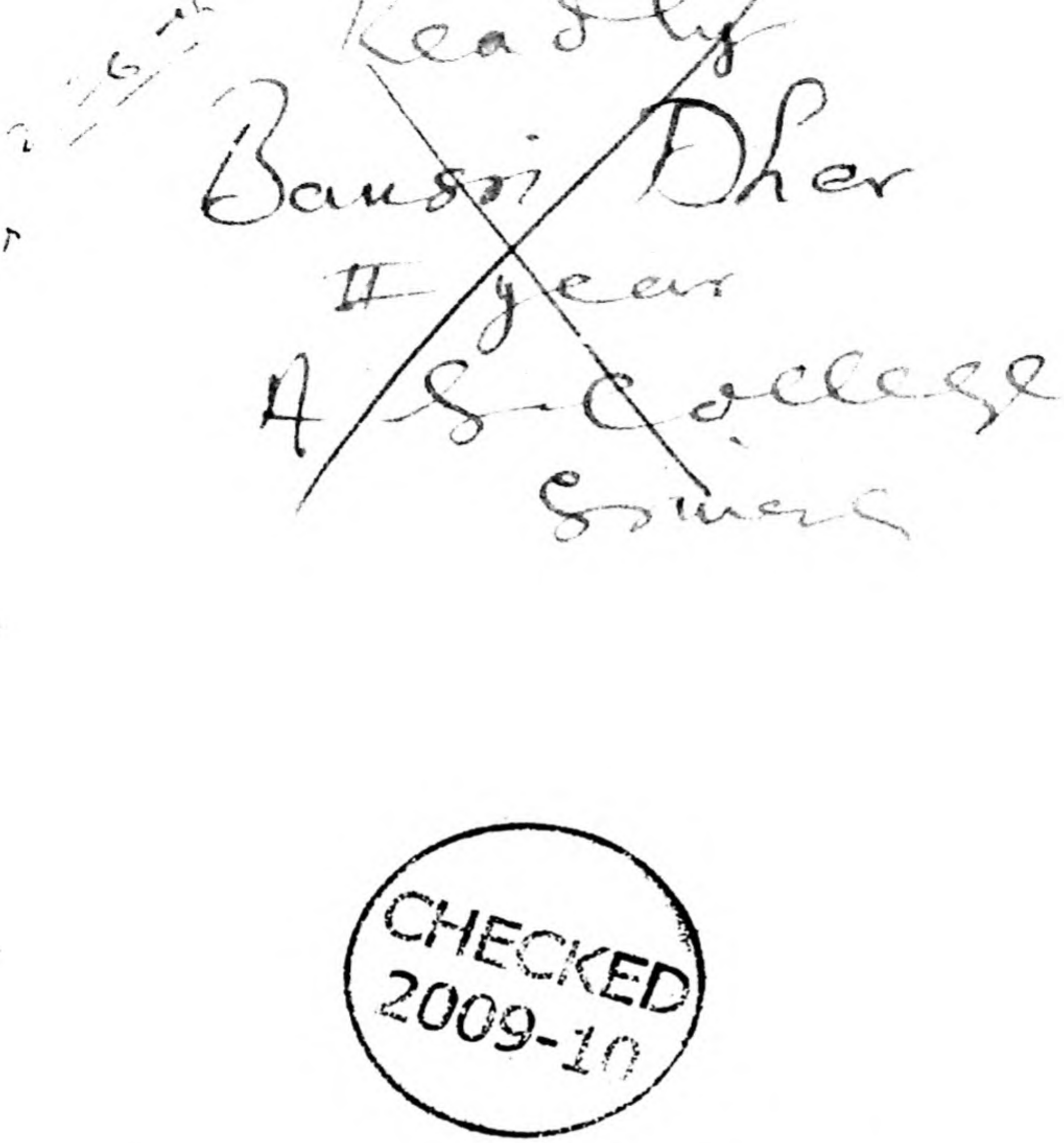

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"ON THE NIGHT OF THE 18TH . . ."

A

By the same Author

BLUEFEATHER

ODDS ON BLUEFEATHER

STORM AGAINST THE WALL

PAID IN FULL

THIRD TIME UNLUCKY

ETC.

"ON THE NIGHT OF THE 18TH . . ."

A NOVEL

BY

LAURENCE W. MEYNELL

1936
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To

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CHAPTER ONE

THERE had been a touch of frost during the night, and when the tardy sun finally brought in the first feeble glimmerings of Monday the eighteenth of January, it showed a mystic world of white. Trees in coppice and hedgerow were miracles of living lace and the ground was frosted over. Round the village of Hope Enderton a good score of eyes peered anxiously out of bedroom windows trying to gauge the amount of bone in the ground and wondering whether it would be too hard for hunting or not.

By nine the anxious eyes were reassured; the sun made up for his reluctant beginning by riding triumphantly into a clear sky, and the whole earth, men, beasts and all growing things, felt strengthened in that benediction.

Like all places in which men live close to nature, Hope Enderton began its business early, and by half-past ten in the morning most of its inhabitants could look back on three or four hours' work already accomplished.

It was at that hour precisely—precisely, that is, as reckoned by the clock on Hope Enderton church tower—that a broad figure, curiously clad in gaiters and a coat whose greenness seemed to proceed more from age than design, made its way down the centre of the single main street.

Hope Enderton is one of those happy places which have suffered no great extremes of fortune, good or bad, during their long history. It lies in a part of England which has been rural since time was, and which surely must go on being so until time ceases. Indeed it is commonly said by the inhabitants of the neighbouring, and to their own way of thinking, more important villages of Far Hope and Bundleberry that when the last trumpet does actually sound it will be an even money chance that nobody in Hope Enderton will hear it.

Hope Enderton cares little for such innuendoes: it has a cricket team which is supreme for ten miles round; a cruciform church with the finest stained glass in West Sussex; and, consequent upon the events herein to be narrated, it achieved the unique distinction of " getting into the papers " —and headlines at that. It was, and always had been, content to live its own life, oblivious of sneering neighbours; and on this particular morning of the eighteenth of January it was busy in its tranquil way about the daily round of trivialities upon which, when all is said and done, all the pretentious, grasping, glittering business of the noisy world must rest.

Outside the door of the Hoops, the bigger of the two inns in the place, Edward Perry the landlord stood, arms akimbo, looking up the street. A fat spaniel shifted herself into a patch of sunshine on the cobbles behind him and settled down with a little grunt of good content, and from somewhere in the old-fashioned courtyard of the place came the

laughter of a serving-maid and the cheerful whistle of a man busy about some task.

Perry noted that the scaffolding was creeping up a little higher round the west window of the church; reflected that it was Buffaloes' night that evening and that he must remember the fact when the brewers' lorry came from Morechester; cursed himself dispassionately for having forgotten to get in fresh stocks of tobacco the day before, and wondered what sort of a day it would be for trade.

He saw the broad-shouldered figure approaching down the centre of the street and, if he had not been so used to the sight, he might even have smiled a trifle. Even in Hope Enderton, tucked right away as it is from main roads and arterial streams of traffic, there is quite a considerable going and coming of motor-cars in these mechanized days; but the man who clung so tenaciously to the crown of the road made no concessions whatsoever to traffic; indeed he took no notice of it. If a vehicle wanted to pass him it had to change direction to do so; if for some reason or other passage was impossible, it had to slow up behind his unhurried three miles an hour until a more favourable moment. Only drivers new to the district tired horns and throats in angry expostulations, the locals knew him and acted accordingly. There was something almost sublime in the man's complete indifference to any but his own requirements.

He looked up as he drew level with the landlord

of the Hoops. Edward Perry knew that red face, with its heavy Roman nose and close-set, beady bright eyes almost as well as he knew his own. He raised a forefinger to his hat. Rain or fine, indoors or out, Edward Perry always wore a soft homburg hat with the neck feather of a wild duck stuck jauntily in its band.

" 'Morning, Mr. Burdett," he said in his quiet tones.

The man in the middle of the road shot a glance at him with his restless eyes, and then suddenly, just when it seemed he intended to give no answer at all, made a most curious response. Out of the folds of his indecently antiquated coat he produced a fat, flabby, white hand, strangely in contrast to the ruddiness of his face.

" Standing there trying to get 'em to come in and spend it, eh, Perry? " he called out in a high, mincing voice. " Well, you won't get any of *this* " (the white hand vigorously slapped his trouser pocket, which responded with an attenuated jingle of coin); " that's what they're all after. Ha! "

Edward Perry permitted himself a slow, grave smile. " It'll be a clever man as gets any of it," he said under his breath, " without he steals it."

He did not really object to the other man's colossal rudeness, in fact he did not really think of it as rudeness. Squire Burdett was an eccentric; everybody recognized that, and there was nothing to be done about it. Burdetts had been at Enderton Court for a number of years. If the old men's

memories were to be trusted there had been a few good Burdetts in the past. This one was a bad one, that was all. It did not look as though there were going to be any more Burdetts to carry the place on in future, and for that Edward Perry was sorry. He was an Englishman, and although, in his own lifetime, he had seen the whole world tumble in ruins and rise, phœnix-like, from the ashes of its burnt-out self, he liked to think that in England things would go on much as they always had done. As for the present man, if he wanted to get along without the village, Perry reckoned that the village could very well get on without him; but as he turned and teased the lazy spaniel bitch with the toe of his boot, he reflected a trifle bitterly that his own none too prosperous till could well do with a few of the many hundreds of pounds which were popularly supposed to be hoarded in Enderton Court.

Arthur Burdett made his way into the so-called square where stood the market-place which on every alternate Wednesday enjoyed a few hours of thronged and busy life. Through the half-open door of the post office he spied the voluminous and untidy bosom of Mrs. Jennings the postmistress, and standing beside her, like a neat chicken beside a somewhat bedraggled and blowsy hen, was Ettie, her fifteen year old daughter. Arthur Burdett's eyes ran appreciatively over her immature but swelling form; another year or two, he thought—his lips moved in pleasant anticipation. Immediately, and

as though maternally aware of some threat in the air, Mrs. Jennings glanced up from her task of reading through the morning batch of post cards, and seeing who was passing, pushed the door to with a vigorous and sanctimonious shove.

Burdett laughed; if he ever had cared what people thought about him he was certainly long past it now. At the age of seventy-three he found it simpler to disregard other people's feelings in life completely.

At this moment another figure entered the square from its opposite side, emerging, in point of fact, from the grocery and general provision shop of John Fenton; a figure seen respectfully off the premises by the combined forces of John Fenton and his wife, who had done all the important things of life in unison for so long that they had formed the habit almost unconsciously. The visitor, client and friend to whom they were bidding good-morning was none other than the Reverend Peter Steeble, who for thirty-eight years had been rector of St. Leonard's Church.

For thirty-eight years, therefore, Hope Enderton had enjoyed a double advantage; in the first place it had been the possessor of a sort of living pun (" Why is Hope Enderton different from any other village in Sussex? Because it has a church with both Tower and Steeble "); and secondly, during all that time, it had enjoyed the ministrations of a Saint.

In days which now seemed to him so far off as

to belong to another world, Peter Steeble's name had been not unknown in the scholastic world, and more than a little famous in at least two fields of sport; but these things he had deliberately put behind him when his wife died. Poor, lovely, laughing Jennifer. Peter Steeble never passed a day, even now, without thinking of her; without missing her; without praying that in God's good time, in some garden of sunshine and quiet and laughter such as she loved on earth, they would one day walk together again.

Until that time came he was content to work. For thirty-eight years he had done his work in Hope Enderton; and in that time he had come to see the world, not as a magic globe of fire as the scientists see it; nor as some fairyland of fun and adventure as some of the Lucky Ones conceive it; but as a sombre sort of place where the days of mankind under the sun are short and set about with sorrow; where a man may rise early and work hard; love his woman and get his children; and through all the weary repetition and insistence of it, find very little worth finding save loyalty to friends and courage in adversity.

When a man has reached that philosophic outlook on life there is little room in his heart for hate, and yet when Peter Steeble stepped out of the Fentons' shop and looked across the square, his eyes lighted on an object that filled him with an angry hatred so strong that he dared not confess it, a hatred that burned in him like a flame whenever

it visited him; that parched his throat a little, and made him feel slightly sick and unsteady.

It came to him now as strongly as it had ever done, and he tried to master it with a mental prayer and to put it away from him.

He knew all about Arthur Burdett's avarice and open blasphemy and laughter at the things of God; but it was not these that he hated him for; there were other things, of which Peter Steeble knew some and guessed others, that made him hate Arthur Burdett.

It had been his intention, on leaving the Fentons' shop, to go straight back to the Rectory where work awaited him, but this would have meant crossing the square so directly in front of Burdett as to make some sort of greeting inevitable; and sooner than endure that, the Rector turned sharply on his heel and set out on a troublesome detour as though he had suddenly remembered somebody at the top end of the village whom he wished to see. And even as he did it he felt in some sort ashamed of himself; the Powers of Light were running away from the Powers of Darkness. It was wrong; it was cowardice; it was tantamount to defeat. He tried to console himself by the reflection that the weakness was in himself and not in any way in the Power he represented. If only he could control his temper, his hatred, he need have no fear of any meeting. . . .

Arthur Burdett knew exactly what was going on in the priest's mind, just as though he had been able

to see inside it. Indeed some people in the village said that he was able to see a good deal further into other folks' minds than was right or proper, and they would go no nearer Enderton Court, especially after dark, than was necessary, on that account

Burdett was amused by the priest's antics. God (he reflected); fancy to think that there was still somebody who believed in the God they rave at you about from pulpit and platform. Why, any sane man could see, *must* see, from his own experience of life, that there was only one god that mattered at all.

Unconsciously his hand closed over his trouser pocket. . . . Money, *money*, there was your god. Evident, palpable, ungainsayably powerful. You might argue learnedly about Omnipotency elsewhere, but here you had it. If you had money what was there you couldn't do? You could command—not long for, but command—privacy, position, security. Men would strip to the waist and dig in pits to keep you warm; work with icy fingers on the wave-washed decks of trawlers to feed you; risk their lives a dozen times a week in a hundred different ways to serve you. All this simply because you had money and they hadn't. Whereas without money—*bah*.

Men would do anything for money, and women too; Arthur Burdett knew that, it had long been his principle and almost his only tenet of faith, and it came back to him now with renewed force

and vigour. Men would do anything for money —*even steal for it*. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead at the thought, never very far from the surface of his consciousness, and he hastened a pace which was already remarkably active for a man in his seventy-third year.

How true it was . . . *steal for it*; of course they would, any of them and all of them, all waiting, waiting to rob him of his lovely money. And, like a fool, here he was wasting his time walking about like any of these village good-for-nothings when he ought to be at home near what was his, counting it, treasuring it, guarding it.

Now all his equanimity was gone. He was not amused now by the thought of Mrs. Jennings' daughter, or the Rector, or anything else. He was in a fever now to get home, and he would have broken into a run only he was afraid of his heart, his cursed, traitor heart which would not let him hurry back fast enough to his money.

If he ran he would unquestionably overstrain an already uncertain heart and kill himself; if he didn't run he was convinced that some imminent and dire misfortune would overtake the only thing he valued in life.

Life without money, or money without life seemed the only alternatives. Arthur Burdett seriously wondered as he hurried along (a rich and tragic study for the gods) whether any human being had ever been in so grievous a dilemma before. At that moment there was nothing in the world

that he cared about save getting back to Enderton Court to see if all was secure. And yet, on the instant, as hurrying along he shot one of his characteristic, suspicious glances sideways, he saw something which in a sense he did care about. At any rate the sight served to increase the deep and bitter resentment which he felt against all mankind.

In the open courtway of the Horseshoes (Enderton's second and smaller inn) he caught sight of a tall, dark young man, raffishly handsome in slightly flamboyant riding kit, leaning against the wall, talking to someone and drinking from a bright pewter tankard. This was Dale Shipley, his half-nephew, the youngest son of his stupid half-brother William, who himself had been no good, a waster, and who had brought appropriately spendthrift stock into the world. Wasters, wasters all. . . . Arthur Burdett actually groaned aloud as the thought of all the money that those two, in different generations, must have wasted struck him again. He averted his eyes from the sight and continued to hurry homeward.

Dale Shipley saw his uncle go by and thought with a sort of dispassionate anger, " There's that bloody old miser "; however, he didn't say this, what he said aloud was, " Well, I'll give you fifty quid for her, Dawley, and I can't spring a penny more."

The man he spoke to was short and swarthy, he had a bright cloth wrapped round his throat and

tiny thin gold rings glinted in the lobes of his ears —Banner Dawley, Higgler, Far Hope Common, it was painted in uncertain lettering on the side of the cart which was his inseparable companion wherever he went. He had gipsy blood in him, he could provide anything from a bundle of firewood to a badger, but most of all he liked dealing in horses. And he enjoyed haggling about the money almost as much as actually disposing of his wares. At the moment he was trying to sell Dale a mare which he had " come by " (the diplomatically vague phrase was his own) a week or two before. The mare was an attractive animal, a thought under sixteen hands with a white blaze and three white stockings that showed off her light chestnut colour handsomely. She looked to have more than a dash of blood about her, and Dawley had vowed by every strange combination of oath known to man that if she wasn't actually the perfect hunter she was as near it as made no matter. She stood now in a loose box at the top of the Horseshoes yard and the two men had just completed a prolonged inspection of her.

" Can she jump? " Dale asked suddenly.

" Jump? " Dawley ran his eye round the yard as though to find some suitable object to lend support to the tone of his voice. His glance toyed for a moment with the six foot wall that bounded the yard and then seemed to reject it as unworthy.

" Jump," he repeated. " By Jesus, Mr. Dale, that mare'll jump like nothing you ever seen. She's a

natural jumper, born to it; there isn't anything in this part of the country she couldn't jump hobbled."

" Not thinking of entering her for the National, are you? " Dale inquired.

" She wouldn't disgrace me if I did, that I will swear."

" I'll take her for a week on trial."

The gipsy spat. " I can't do business like that, Mr. Dale, and a gentleman like you knows it. What money have I got? "

" A damned sight more than me."

" Ah, gentlemen always talk like that. No, I can't do trial business, Mr. Dale; it's take it or leave it with me; and a good bargain at that."

" Fifty then."

" Sixty-five and cheap."

" Cheap my foot, and it's ten to one you stole the horse to start with."

The gipsy's eyes flickered but he said nothing, so Dale drained his tankard and set it ostentatiously down on the sill of a window. " Nice day," he said, " if the rain holds off. Well, I'll be getting along."

The gipsy was with him in two strides, and a swarthy hand was laid on his arm. " Come, Mr. Dale, you want that mare—at sixty pounds."

" Sixty? " Dale swung round.

" To a gentleman like you, as I know can ride her properly."

" Damn you for a Jew," Dale cried explosively, " but I do want her and that's a fact. I haven't had a decent horse of my own for two years. I'll

Fee wo 890!

give you sixty for her, Dawley, but it'll have to be thirty down and the rest in a month's time." .

Banner Dawley considered, his quick eyes searching his man. Had he been dealing with another gipsy he would not have hesitated, but with a gentleman it was different. You couldn't trust gentlemen far. Still, risk nothing, win nothing.

" Forty down," he amended.

" No wonder all the bloody Jews have gone back to Palestine," Dale offered agreeably. " All right then, forty it is, and the mare's mine now. Here, Charley "—he put his head through the window of the Horseshoes tap—" bring out a couple of pints, we've struck a bargain."

Banner Dawley drove his cart away from the Horseshoes well satisfied. Money; a strange thing (he reflected) where these gentlemen who were always hard up and who never did any work got it all from. They did say that the old gentleman who lived by himself in the big yellow house outside the village had thousands of pounds saved by —well, he wasn't doing too badly himself for a higgler of Far Hope Common.

The sight of a blue uniform in the roadway chased these agreeable reflections from his mind. Instantly he became secretive, mask-like, aware—the immediate and natural reaction of the born lawbreaker to the presence of the professional law supporter.

He touched his cap subserviently as he went by. " Good morning, Mr. White," he said.

Edward pegs a sensible man

Sergeant James White nodded. As a matter of routine he ran an expertly appraising eye over Dawley's outfit. You never knew; Homer occasionally nodded, and even a fly card like Banner Dawley might make a mistake sometime: a pheasant's head might be sticking out from under the firewood, or the tip of a hare's leg show whitely among the sacking. There was nothing doing today, however, so James White let the gipsy and his cart go by unchallenged. The Sergeant had always a full day's work; and before that day was out he was to have even more than his fill. . . .

When John Fenton ushered the Rector out of his shop he looked across the square at the green-coated, shambling figure on the other side.

" There's old Mr. Burdett," he said half aloud, and his wife who was by his side, clutched his arm and said, " John, couldn't you go and speak to him about it, *now*."

Fenton shrugged his shoulders in despair. " What's the good? " he said. " He'll do it if he's a mind to; and if it means money, he will have a mind to; and that's all there is to it."

" Can't we stop him somehow? "

" How? "

Devastating monosyllable, which Mary Fenton did not attempt to answer; instead she said, " Doesn't it seem wicked that people should have power like that to hurt others."

Again Fenton shrugged his shoulders. " I don't know that it's wicked exactly," he said, " it's the

way of the world. But if he does it, it means the end of Fenton's Stores, that's certain." For a minute or two he was silent, then he said in a curiously quiet voice, " Pop round to the back, Mary, and see if that boy has got his bicycle ready yet; time we made a start with the orders."

Mary Fenton obediently ran about her business and left her husband staring after the disappearing figure in the disreputable coat.

Arthur Burdett reached home at last, puffing and apprehensive. He stumped his way up the unweeded drive, and going round to the back quarters began immediately to shout, " Lumsdale, Lumsdale, where are you, Lumsdale? "

In response to all this high-pitched and querulous clamour a serving-man came unhurriedly out of the kitchen. His closely cropped head and his hang-dog expression made him an odd object to look at. Most people would have mistrusted him on sight, and why he should be the one person in the world in whom Arthur Burdett had any sort of faith is a mystery.

" Everything all right, Lumsdale? " he queried as soon as he saw him.

The man smiled, almost sneered, a little at the old fool's windy apprehensions.

" None's been, nowt's happened," he snapped.

" Good." Arthur Burdett made his way into the house, and just before he left the kitchen region shouted over his shoulder, " I shan't want any lunch to-day, Lumsdale."

" All right."

Burdett hurried to his living-room in the front of the house and ran his eye rapidly round its familiar scene. Nothing was disturbed; he had managed to stave off the hostile world a little longer, it had not robbed him yet. With a grateful grunt he sank into the only chair, and drawing his coat close about him (no fire was lit in the grate) prepared to examine his treasures.

First he drew towards him a calendar (the gift of some optimistic tradesman, else it would not have been there) and pulled off the top leaf, disclosing that appropriate to the day:

MONDAY, JANUARY 18TH.

" There are no true riches save goodness."

Arthur Burdett chuckled loud and long over such idiocy. His laughter doubtless would have been less hearty could he have foreseen that Monday the 18th of January was to be the last day of his life.

CHAPTER TWO

ST. LEONARD'S clock chimed three measured times and its sound travelled far over the frosty air. Dale Shipley came downstairs in a hurry, yet he seemed to be in deliberate mood as he drew on his overcoat in the little hall. He glanced at his wrist-watch —a quarter to seven. "Mrs. Somers," he called.

His faithful factotum presented a cheerfully ruddy face from the kitchen regions.

"I'm going over to dinner with Captain Reeves," Dale announced.

"Yessir," Mrs. Somers beamed; she always thoroughly enjoyed the ceremony of watching Dale set off on his evening diversions and drew any amount of simple, vicarious pleasure from seeing him in his dinner clothes.

"I'm walking as it's a fine night," Dale amplified, "so I'm giving myself plenty of time."

"That's right, sir. Mind you don't lose the way."

Dale laughed at the joke. "Not likely," he said, and taking his favourite stick from the stand he let himself out into the cold, sharp darkness.

Dale Shipley lived by himself at Fielden Cottage, and a little more than a mile away by road, less if one took the field paths, stood Ferney House where he was bidden to dine.

Ferney House at a quarter to seven knew none of the peace and quiet of Fielden Cottage. Captain and Mrs. Reeves were two of the most popular people in the district and they did a considerable amount of entertaining, but somehow practice never brought Nellie Reeves anywhere nearer to perfection, and on a day when people were expected to dinner a tense atmosphere reigned in the place almost from breakfast time, working up to a despairing crescendo of last minute telephone calls and emergency discussions with the staff any time after tea.

Both the Reeves were more than half Irish, and there was a sort of cheerful irresponsibility in their blood which seemed to rejoice rather than otherwise in extempore measures and in wild domestic crises of which they always managed to see the humorous side.

On this particular occasion matters were complicated by the fact that there was a visitor staying in the house—Lois Everest, a friend of Nellie Reeves, down for the hunting, a polished, soignée creature from London, who at a quarter to seven precisely was doing her heroic best to bathe in less than six inches of hot water and shouting out dutiful and unconvincing assurances through the bathroom door that she liked it. The business of providing a dinner " for company " had diverted the cook's attention from the Ideal boiler with disastrous effects to the water system.

" And where in God's name are the almonds? "

Nellie Reeves demanded tragically, flying from the bathroom door to the kitchen, like a harassed general from one sorely contested point of conflict to another; a query which the cook countered with the cheerful assurance, " It'll be a fine pair of roasted chickens this will be to-morrow lunchtime, if the oven keeps on as slow as it is."

" Please, 'm, the Captain never gave me any cigarettes for the boxes," the parlourmaid announced lugubriously at the kitchen door, and Nellie Reeves paled. No cigarettes; just exactly and lamentably like Pat. She fled upstairs into her husband's dressing-room, where the only portion of his anatomy visible was a black-trousered backside protruding from under a camp-bed.

" Pat, what about the cigarettes? "

" I've lost my confounded stud. I'll swear the damned thing rolled somewhere under here."

" Is this it? "

" Where? "

" On the dressing-table."

Pat Reeves made a laboured emergence from beneath the bed and scowled ungraciously at his wife.

" Yes, of course it is," he said. " What cigarettes? "

" Didn't you get any this afternoon? "

" No."

" I asked you to go into Morechester——"

" My good girl, I went somewhere else this afternoon."

For a moment husband and wife looked at one

another, and the air between them was charged with something more than mere domestic tragedy or humour.

Nellie nodded. " All right," she said shortly. " It doesn't matter. People will have to smoke their own, that's all. And anyway Dale is sure to come early and he's always got a lot."

. . . . . .

Despite the inauspicious nature of these preparations, everything miraculously came right in the end, and by twenty past seven, when the first guest was announced, she was shown in to a collected host and hostess sitting in a charming drawing-room.

And the drawing-room of Ferney House was really charming. Nancy Featherstone knew the room of old and had always loved its odd shape, its great open fireplace and its heavy, black oak beams.

The instant she entered the room her heart fell. He was not there. She was not particularly fond of the Reeves, and had accepted their invitation solely because she hoped that a certain person would be there. And he was not. It would have been physically impossible for her, even in the most casual way, to frame his name and ask whether he was to come or not. She would have to wait now and hope. And at the age of forty Nancy Featherstone was getting tired of waiting and hoping.

" Miss Everest—Miss Featherstone."

She was being introduced to someone, an ordeal which always made her feel awkward.

" How d'you do? "

Just like the Reeves, she reflected, to spring somebody really smart from London on her without warning. A backless frock and blood-red nails, the sort of things he would fall for straight away, of course.

" Doctor Chambers, 'm."

Everybody smiled at the entrance of Sydney Chambers into the room. He was short and looked comically schoolboyish in his tight-fitting, out-of-date dinner-suit. Tubby is the exact word to describe his figure and his laughing face and his happy staccato voice.

He visited Ferney House as often as he decently could. " Dine where there's plenty of money," was his motto, " then you get good food and good wine, and you'll do your stomach no harm."

" A glass of sherry, doctor? "

" Thanks."

Nellie Reeves busied herself with the sherry decanter and the two small dishes of salted almonds, which had mysteriously turned up, when all hope had been abandoned, in the cook's bedroom.

With the wine, talk began to flow more easily, and indeed conversation was never very difficult where Sydney Chambers was present. He saw such a deal of suffering and unhappiness in a professional way that he did his best to look on the other side of things whenever possible. Horse and hound, hound and horse; the talk turned as naturally that way as in Chelsea it might have turned to palette

and pen, or in Mayfair to personalities and perversion.

Nancy Featherstone could talk hunting as well as anyone; in fact she was summed up in Lois Everest's brilliant account of the evening to a London friend by the cruel description, " My dear, there was one woman there, in a disastrous chiffon affair, who practically *was* a horse "; but for once her heart was not much in the talk and her eyes kept travelling to the gilded clock on the mantelshelf.

If numbers counted for anything in the Reeves' household, they were on her side, for so far the party was a man short—the vital question was *who was the man to be?*

Lois Everest thought the woman who was practically a horse dull; but then God had seen fit to give Lois Everest a lovely skin and a beautiful face. Men were always anxious to talk to her, she could have all the traffic with them she wanted; she need never look forward with fear to being forty and to aching with that awful, humiliating emptiness for love which only the women who are forced to wear the " disastrous chiffon affairs " can know.

But presently Doctor Chambers, whose eye for a pretty girl was as discriminating at fifty-five as it ever had been, came to the rescue of Lois, and Nancy Featherstone was left to her apprehensive wonderings undisturbed.

" Were you out to-day? " the doctor asked.

" Yes. Gorgeous, wasn't it? "

" I didn't go. Busy."

" Too bad."

" People ought to be penalized for being sick in the hunting season, don't you think? "

" Definitely."

" A good run, wasn't it? "

" Perfectly marvellous."

" Which way? "

" My good man, don't ask me. I don't know this country from Peckham Rye."

" And don't you know Peckham Rye? "

" Is there such a place? "

" Oh, rather. I lived there for four years—my first practice."

" My God—what do people do there? "

" Oh, they live and die and have babies; and love and hate and sneer at one another, just like anywhere else you know," the doctor said quietly.

" What are you two talking about over there? " their hostess called out.

" I'm being told off for being a snob," Lois laughed.

" Serve you right," came the unequivocal answer. " Doctor, have another glass of sherry."

" Thanks, I will. Which way did the hunt go this afternoon, Reeves? "

" Don't know. I wasn't out."

" Not out? I saw you go past my place this morning."

" Not out this afternoon, I mean. I came home just after lunch."

The doctor paused, sherry decanter in hand, a picture of comical astonishment. " Came home early? " he cried. " That's not like you, is it? "

" No. I wasn't very fit, that was all."

" Not fit? " Chambers made no effort to hide the anticipatory keenness of his voice. " Sounds like a job for me. Anything wrong? "

" No. A bit off my oats, that's all."

The gilded clock on the mantelshelf chimed the half-hour, and with that extreme punctuality which servants so amazingly reserve for the few occasions when it is not wanted, the parlourmaid appeared in the doorway and announced that dinner was served.

" But Mr. Shipley hasn't come yet," Nellie said, and the maid retired with every show of long-suffering virtue.

Nancy Featherstone missed the next two sentences her host directed to her completely.

It was all right. He was coming; the evening was saved. She turned smiling to Captain Reeves. " What did you say? " she asked.

" Isn't Dale a nuisance? " Mrs. Reeves put in. " He usually comes too early."

" Was he out to-day? " the doctor asked.

" No, he hasn't got a horse at the moment," Nancy said, " but I believe he's buying one."

" Didn't know he had enough money to buy anything," Chambers said bluntly.

" Who in hell has? " asked Lois Everest, who had never done half a day's work in her life and

at the age of twenty-one had walked into a comfortable income of nearly two thousand a year; and Reeves, scowling darkly in the background, said, " Some people have got a damn sight too much, if you ask me."

" Meaning me? " Lois inquired blandly.

" Good Lord, no, Lois, of course not. I was thinking of something else entirely."

" Oh, don't pay any attention to Pat," Nellie cut in quickly, " he's in a foul temper to-day because——"

" Mr. Shipley, 'm."

Dale stood in the doorway, tall and dark and good-looking. Nancy did not look at him, she kept her eyes resolutely away. It was always like this when he appeared, an absurd shyness seized on her, hypnotizing her eyes, drying her throat, and making it almost a physical impossibility for the first minute or two to look at him or say anything to him.

" Hallo, Dale," his hostess called out, " I was just slanging you for being late."

Very little contrition showed on Dale's handsome face and precious little grace went into his apology. " Sorry. I walked over, and didn't give myself quite enough time."

He's in a bad temper, Nancy thought, something's upset him; and her spirits sank. In a detached way she could even marvel at the absurdity of the human heart which could be so humiliatingly dependent for its happiness on the very inflection of another being's voice.

" Never mind. Have a glass of sherry. You know everybody, of course, Dale, except Miss Everest."

Dale was duly introduced to Lois Everest, but for a young man of his not undeserved reputation he showed singularly superficial interest for once in backless frocks and blood-red nails.

" Dinner," the maid announced in frigid clarity at the door, " is served," and the doctor took any momentary awkwardness out of the situation by rubbing his hands together vigorously and announcing with unaffected eagerness, " And, by gad, I'm ready for it."

Whatever seething maelstroms of preparation went on in the kitchen, Nellie Reeves was usually able to congratulate herself on the finished product when it reached the dining-room, and by the time everyone had been cheered with a dish of piping hot celery soup she was able to glance round the table and feel reassured. She could have wished that Pat, at the other end of the table, were a little more talkative, but he was in one of his rare moods, and whenever she tried to catch his eye to cajole him out of it, he resolutely looked the other way.

Doctor Chambers ate a plate of soup, a fried sole, half a partridge and came back for more, some cheese straws and a fresh fruit salad. This excellent meal he accompanied by three glasses of Burgundy which a connoisseur might have found not quite warm enough but which suited Sydney Chambers very well. These activities did not interfere in any way with his flow of talk, and he told

three really funny stories and generally prodded the conversational ass with skill and acumen when that uncertain steed showed signs of flagging.

For this Nellie Reeves was grateful to him, for talk somehow was not as bright as she liked it to be round her table and once or twice gave unmistakable symptoms of wearing a trifle thin.

" What's the matter, Dale? " Nancy asked under cover of the general conversation.

" The matter? Nothing. Why, what should be the matter? "

" You're in a bad temper."

" I suppose you want me to be ever bright and cheerful like those dear little Girl Guides of yours."

Nancy flushed slightly. She watched the maid filling Dale's glass again and wished that he wouldn't drink so much.

" Which way did you walk here? " she asked.

Dale Shipley shot a sudden glance at her almost as though he suspected something behind the question.

" Which way? The road of course."

" You might have come over the fields."

" Well, I didn't. I came on the road. I wasn't very late, was I? "

" I have known you later."

Lois Everest enjoyed her meal. Being seated next to the portable electric fire, she was slowly recovering from the chilling effects of her half-bath, and although her host did not shine in the conversational line, his lack was more than com-

pensated for by the raciness of Doctor Chambers on the other side. Such raciness, indeed, that Miss Everest began to entertain hopes (actually quite unjustified) that if she got a chance of half an hour alone with the doctor she might hear a story or two worth repeating at her bridge club.

Pat Reeves put in a spasmodic word or two when sheer politeness seemed to demand it and for the rest he devoted himself in a sort of cold fury to his dinner.

" Not doing badly for a man who's off his oats," Doctor Chambers thought as he noticed the size of his host's second go at the partridge.

There was port, but the men did not linger over it. Captain Reeves suddenly asked a strange question.

" I suppose you see a good deal of—of abnormality, don't you, Chambers? " he asked. " Perversion and diseased intellect, and all that sort of thing."

" A fair bit," the doctor agreed; and indeed in a lifetime given up to dealing with the real and fancied ills of his fellows, a man sees some strange sidelights on human nature.

" What type do you find it most in? "

" Abnormality? " The doctor rolled a speculative eye at his host. " Well, d'you know," he countered at last, " I'd find it hard to say that I have ever known a really normal human being."

Pat Reeves gave a short laugh. " I suppose not," he said. " Well, shall we join the ladies? "

" Willingly," said Chambers, and as he made his

way to the drawing-room he reflected that it was an odd sort of conversation they had just had; indeed, looking back on the dinner, the cheerful little doctor wasn't at all sure that there hadn't been one or two odd patches in the conversation where questions and half sentences had either meant nothing, or else a good deal more than they seemed to.

The moment the men entered the drawing-room they were conscripted by Nellie Reeves into a discussion as to what game should be played. That *some* game should be played she was determined (much to Lois Everest's secret horror), and the choice at the moment seemed to hover between consequences and charades.

" Come on, doctor," Nellie cried, " you're always good at games, tell us what we shall play."

" The Captain wanted on the telephone, 'm," the maid announced from the door so apt and pat that it might have been the name of some new drawing-room game she was proposing.

" Fix it up whilst I'm out," Reeves said, and made his way to the dark little corner of the hall where the telephone stood.

" . . . hallo . . . yes, speaking . . . that's all right, dinner's over . . . yes, he is here, d'you want him . . . a *what*? Where? . . . Good God. . . ."

When Pat Reeves got back to the drawing-room the doctor was holding forth in full spate of cheerful nonsense, but he stopped abruptly when he caught sight of the white face of the man in the doorway.

"Hello," he said, "what's up?"

"Come on, Pat," Nellie cried, "we've just arranged to play 'murder.'"

"I wouldn't bother to," her husband said slowly, "there's been one done already."

For a moment everybody stared at him in silence, then with an unconvincing little laugh his wife said, "One done already? What on earth are you talking about, Pat?"

"Someone has killed old Arthur Burdett up at the Court."

Doctor Chambers was perhaps less taken aback by the news than anybody else in the room; at any rate he had time to notice, and be surprised by, a long, unfathomable look which passed between husband and wife and which left Nellie Reeves almost as white as the man in the doorway.

"How d'you know the man's been murdered?" he asked.

"That was White, the policeman, on the telephone; he wants you to go up there at once."

Chambers nodded fatalistically. "It would happen on a night I'm out to dinner," he said, and as he left the room he heard the bright brittleness of Lois Everest's voice:

"A murder in the village? But how frightfully thrilling; it might be one of us."

CHAPTER THREE

"WILL you be staying long, sir?" Edward Perry asked.

His guest, who had just signed the visitors' book in a firm and microscopically neat hand, said, "I hardly know, Mr. ——"

"Perry, sir."

"Mr. Perry. Three or four days anyway—possibly longer. Have you got any claret in the cellar?"

"There are a few bottles, sir, though we don't get much call for it here; wine drinking has gone out practically, as you may say."

"A pity. *Vinum cor hominum laetificat*—but perhaps Bible reading has gone out as well."

Perry grinned. "Not so much of it as there used to be, sir," he said. "It's more pictures than prayers nowadays, in a manner of speaking."

"Um. Have you ever read Sphengler's 'Decline of the West'? Room for a mot there: 'Rise of the New (or Mae) West; Decline of the old (or cultured) West.' Well, never mind. Change isn't necessarily a decline, is it?"

"Not in Hope Enderton it isn't, sir," Edward Perry answered emphatically. "In the last ten years I've seen the electric brought to the village,

and water laid on to pretty well every house, and the bus service to Morechester started. People are well off compared with what they used to be—only they don't realize it."

"Aye, there's the rub. Are people happier than they used to be? "

Edward Perry wondered.

" Do you play chess, Mr. Perry? " his guest suddenly asked.

" Chess, sir? I don't know as I do; but Mr. White the policeman, he's a great hand at it; he's your man if you want a game of chess any time."

The tall man smiled. " Very fortunate. I was just going to ask you the way to his house. I'm down from Scotland Yard to investigate this murder at Enderton Court—of course, you knew that, didn't you? "

" Well, sir, I——"

" And my name's Kingsley Hylton, you knew that, too, didn't you? "

" I won't say I——"

" And I'm slightly mad like all great detectives."

Perry grinned uncertainly.

" But not mad enough to do without food, so bacon and eggs is the morning order and very hot coffee, at eight o'clock sharp, and don't forget to look out that claret."

" Very good, sir."

" And now how do I reach the chess-playing police sergeant? "

" Turn right out of the inn here, sir, and keep

round to the right up the Morechester Road. You'll see the police cottage about a quarter of a mile along on the left—stands by itself, you can't miss it very well."

"You'd be surprised at what I can miss when I try," the detective said enigmatically, and with a quick smile he made his way out of the room.

Edward Perry was definitely impressed. He picked up the visitors' book and studied the tiny writing, as neat as six point print:

"KINGSLEY HYLTON, LONDON";

then, putting the book down, he called to mind the prematurely bald head, the thick glasses, the thin lips, the disconcertingly quick eyes and the long, restless hands.

"Well, 'e's a character and no mistake," was the landlord's comment as he hurried to the bar with this latest and most delectable addition to the positive orgy of speculation and discussion set up by the Enderton Court affair.

For curiosity (and also partly because he had a strong mathematical kink in his mind) Kingsley Hylton counted his steps from the turning of the Morechester Road to the cottage. His long, thin legs took an easy thirty-five inch stride. He found that the five hundredth step brought him almost exactly to the wicket gate, which he considered to be not too bad an endorsement of the innkeeper's "about a quarter of a mile." The night was dry and dark, too

dark indeed for him to be certain of his destination had not a neat little blue lamp with POLICE showing whitely from it been there to reassure him.

He walked up two or three yards of well-kept path and, not being able to see any bell, knocked precisely on the door. It was opened by a broad-shouldered man in police sergeant's uniform. The stiff collar of his jacket was open, and a useful-looking pair of feet were encased in comfortable carpet slippers. His right hand held a pen. When he spoke Hylton was struck at once by the richness of his voice and by the unexpected quality of it.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Do you know, that is precisely what I have been rather nervously asking myself for the past few hours!"

Police Sergeant James White took a deep breath. "If you've got any games to play," he said, "don't start them here. I'm busy."

"I don't doubt it, Sergeant," said the other, with a complete change of voice. "Let me introduce myself—I am Detective Inspector Kingsley Hylton from Scotland Yard—here is my identity card."

James White moved back from the door with a welcoming gesture. "I'm very sorry, sir, I'm sure; come in."

Kingsley Hylton accepted the invitation, and in a minute or two was sitting facing the other man in a pleasant but rather uncomfortably crowded room. The table which stood between them was littered with various typewritten and printed documents,

and a book of police regulations lay open among them.

The two men took frank stock of each other in the light. Kingsley Hylton saw a strong, agreeable face crowned with black hair and distinguished by one of those square-shaped, dimpled chins which women, for some curious and deep-seated reason, find so irresistible. The Inspector was used to summing men up quickly and he liked the look of Sergeant White.

"Before we really begin," he said, "there is a certain word which you have been told to expect, isn't there?"

White nodded.

"I'll write it down," Hylton said, and drawing a sheet of paper towards him did so.

"Is that all right?"

"Right, sir," White answered, smiling.

"Curious, isn't it," the Inspector went on, putting his gold pencil away, "how much the public believe we take on trust? Never take anybody on trust, White. I shan't trust you. I shall consider everything you say to be the outcome of local prejudice, ignorance, or narrow country outlook—but I shall pay attention to it for all that; and you, for your part, better look upon me as one of those too, too clever, overtheorized people who can't see what's sticking up as plain as a pikestaff an inch in front of their own noses."

"Very good, sir," White answered, not one whit abashed by this somewhat unconventional opening.

The Inspector drew out a leather case and offered

the Sergeant a long, thin cigar. James White, though a pipe smoker by preference, seemed willing to try anything once.

"Thank you, sir," he said, helping himself.

"You look busy," the Inspector said, indicating the crowded table.

"Busy?" the policeman laughed. "My word, sir, what with Diseases of Cattle Acts and Registration of Aliens and Licences, and everything else to be filled in in triplicate, half a man's time has to be in his office nowadays. Every policeman wants a clerk at his elbow to-day."

"Quite right. Too much paper. Have you ever heard the theory that when five per cent. of a nation's employables are in Government service it is in a fundamentally rotten state—it's about 3·5 per cent. in this country at the moment and rapidly mounting. Now tell me about the murder."

James White drew a note-book from a capacious side pocket and consulted its extremely neatly kept pages.

"Well, sir, on the night of the eighteenth I was doing a round over Nyeton way, that's as far as I go on the west side, and I keep a bit of an eye on it for poachers in the big Nyeton woods. I got back here about half-past eight, I should think, with nothing to report. After about an hour there was a knock at the door—well, more a thumping it was, like somebody in a hurry. When I opened it, there was Mr. Lumsdale (here the Sergeant consulted his note-book more exactly). '*Come up to the Court,*

quick,' he said, '*someone's done the old man in*.' I put my helmet on and went along with him to Enderton Court, and there I found the body of the dead man. I——"

"Half a minute, half a minute. Cut out the story for a bit and let's get some of the dramatis personæ straightened out. Who is the dead man?"

"Mr. Arthur Burdett, sir, he is, or was, perhaps I should say."

"Maybe he still is. Have you any theories about survival after death, White?"

"Yes, sir, pretty strong ones, but I don't see that they come in here exactly."

"Quite so. One in the eye for me; I'm such a scatter-brained devil for chasing off after hares. Strictly business in the future. What about Arthur Burdett?"

"He was what you may call the squire of the village, sir."

"Lived in style?"

"No. Lived in misery, sir, with just one man-servant to do everything for him, and more than half of the big house shut up."

"No money, I suppose?"

"Plenty, from all accounts, but Arthur Burdett was a miser."

"That's interesting. A real genuine miser?"

"Pretty genuine, sir. He had his two dogs destroyed a few years back because he wouldn't go on paying the licences; and he was always the last man in the village to pay his rates, though they

daren't hardly summons him because he was a J.P., though he never sat on the bench."

"Was he popular?"

"Very much the reverse, sir. Very few people had a good word for him. He never spent a penny more than he could help, didn't drink or smoke, and was never known to give anything away in his life. He'd sit by candlelight at nights, and when the choir came carolling at Christmas he'd even put the candle out so they wouldn't think he was in."

"Why are we worrying about the death of this unsavoury human?" the Inspector asked.

James White laughed. "Well, sir, I don't know about you," he answered. "I'm concerned in it because it's my duty, and that's all."

Kingsley Hylton sighed. "My eyes are getting completely full of your skilfully placed ripostes, Sergeant. Duty it is. So forward. A miser of the old school, loved by none, disliked by all, is murdered. Who did it? Is that the problem?"

"That's about it, sir."

"Was Burdett married?"

"No."

"Nobody else in the house but this one man-servant?"

"Andrew Lumsdale."

"What sort is Mr. Andrew Lumsdale?"

"Rum sort of chap, sir. Very reserved. Difficult to get to the bottom of him. About forty, I should say, and very powerful by the look of him. He's a foreigner in these parts, comes from Cheshire or some

such place, and I don't think people here have taken too kindly to him."

"Um. Did Burdett have any relatives round about?"

"The only one I've ever heard of, sir, is young Mr. Shipley; he would be a sort of nephew; well, he is the son of the dead man's half-brother."

"'Brothers and sisters I have none,
That man's father was my father's son,'"

the Inspector murmured reflectively; "don't try to catch me with that one, because I know the answer. What about Mr. Shipley?"

"A bit of a wild young chap, sir. In and out of the pubs a good deal and so forth, but no real harm in him that I know of."

"Was he friendly with old Burdett?"

"Very seldom went near him as far as I know."

"What sort of terms were they on? Did you ever hear Shipley talking about him?"

"Yes, sir, once, in the bar of the Hoops."

"What did he say?"

"As near as I can remember he said that of all the farthing-fumbling old bastards he'd ever known his uncle was the worst."

"Tut—tut."

"And now I come to think of it, sir, he added what you may call a rider to the effect that when the old Jew-twister died, the devil would kick him out of hell for fear he stole the coals."

"Bad to worse. Did Burdett keep any money

in the house with him? Was he a real, genuine, Lyceum sort of miser who sat up at night letting the yellow gold trickle through his fingers? "

" I couldn't say about what he did at night, Inspector; nor for that matter about the amount of money he kept with him. People used to say there was thousands of pounds there, but somehow I doubt it."

" Was any stolen? "

" We don't know, sir. There was a small wall safe open in the room where he was murdered, and there was a considerable sum of money in there."

" How much? "

" Just over three hundred pounds."

" Notes? "

" All sorts, sir. Gold, silver and notes."

" So whoever did the murder left that behind, anyway."

" Of course he might have taken some and left some as a blind."

" True. Did you find anything at all to give you any sort of clue? "

" Well, sir, to be quite candid, I didn't. Not a thing. Maybe I'm slow witted, and in any case, of course, I'm not used to this sort of thing. I don't mind admitting that when Lumsdale came to the door and said there'd been a murder I got a bit excited. I thought it would only be a question of running up there and having a look round and making a sensational arrest the same evening probably. But when I got there I didn't find a

thing—as far as I can see it might have been anyone. Of course there may be some fingerprints——"

" Leave fingerprints for fiction," Hylton urged; " look for Motive. The heart gives more people away than the hand, White, believe me. *Cui bono?* who gets anything out of it? That's the unfailing fingerprint. People very seldom murder without motive."

" Quite so, sir."

" Well, come on, let's go and view the corpse in its natural surroundings, shall we? "

" Have you a car, sir? "

" No. Two long legs. Encase the feet in regulation footgear——"

" I'm sorry about the slippers, Inspector."

" Why worry? I always think better when my feet are comfortable. Many, many things are vain superfluities in life, White, but two are essential to happiness—easy boots and open bowels. Are you married? "

Sergeant James White stared at his somewhat disconcerting visitor.

" Yes, I'm married, sir," he answered slowly.

" Your wife? " Hylton picked up a photograph from a side table.

" That's my wife."

Kingsley Hylton studied a picture that might have taken and held any man's eye—that of a finely-made woman, clad in the most abbreviated of bathing costumes, poised on a rock, a streaming mass of hair blown away from her by the wind.

" A fine looking woman, if I may say so," he said.

" People have thought so, sir. She isn't in at the moment. She usually goes over to her sister's at Nyeton on Tuesday evenings for a bit."

Hylton nodded and lit another of his curious thin cigars whilst White, with the rapidity of a quick change artist, shed all signs of négligée and became the complete official, correctly appointed cap-a-pie.

" Now, sir, are you ready? " he asked, and Kingsley Hylton, with his stoop and his long legs, was more than ready.

The night was colder now and starlit, and walking was pleasant. Hylton was pleased to find a companion who could match his more than four miles an hour with apparent ease, and the pair swung along in great style.

The Inspector broke the silence with one of his unexpected queries.

" Where were you educated, White? " A query which elicited perhaps as unexpected a reply.

" Shrewsbury."

" Ah."

" I suppose you thought my voice and all that was a cut above the average board-school product? "

" Well, yes, to be candid, I did."

" Thanks for the discerning compliment. But I'm not the Public School type either, Inspector. I got there by accident really. My people weren't gentle born. They got a bit of money suddenly and had ideas, that's all. Sending me to Shrewsbury was one of them."

" Not a bad idea either."

James White laughed his easy, agreeable laugh.

"Well, I don't know. If you've got to earn your living in the world I'm not at all sure that this Public School business is such an unmixed blessing."

After a silence Hylton said, " You don't return the compliment by being curious about me."

" I try not to be curious about anybody except in an official capacity," White answered pleasantly, and the Inspector laughed aloud. He had acquired what seemed to be an outsize in raspberries served in as unoffending a manner as might be imagined. He was beginning to like Police Sergeant White immensely.

" Here we are, Inspector. Enderton Court. This is the back drive, our nearest way. There is a front way with a Lodge to it."

" Anyone in the Lodge? "

" A man called Lawson and his family. People say that Burdett only let him stay there because Lawson was blackmailing him, but that's all rot. The truth is Lawson had to pay a thumping high rent for the place and Burdett was there every Monday morning to collect it in person."

They had passed along the dark and lonely back drïve now, and could see the dark, unfriendly lump of the house against the star-studded sky.

"Biggish place," Hylton said.

"Yes. Mostly shut up now, though. That you, Edwardes? "

A uniformed figure moved in the darkness of the back porch. "That's right, Sergeant."

"We've got a man from Nyeton at the back here and a Morechester man at the front. The usual crowd of sightseers has been up, of course, but we've kept them on the move. We're only using this back door at present."

"Why?"

"Most likely the man who did the trick must have come in the other way we think." The Sergeant switched on a powerful torch and showed a long, cold-looking passage. "That's the gun-room on the right, or what used to be the gun-room, so they say; nothing in it now; and all the kitchen quarters are beyond that baize door."

"What about putting a light on?" Hylton suggested.

White laughed. "Arthur Burdett never paid to have electric light put in here, believe me, sir," he said; "there is an oil lamp or two in the place, but nothing more. This way for the hall, Inspector."

They passed into a large, barren-looking hall, whose barn-like appearance was intensified by the rather feeble light of an oil lamp standing on a wall bracket.

Kingsley Hylton looked about him. "Fine staircase," he said.

"Yes, sir, a good staircase. Here's the room; a sort of a study place."

They crossed over the bare floor of the hall, and

the Sergeant, producing a key from his pocket, unlocked the door.

"The Chief Constable left—er—*it* here for you to see, Inspector," he announced over his shoulder.

"Very kind of the Chief Constable," Hylton murmured. "D'you mean to say this is all the light the old chap ever had?"

"A good deal more than he had," the Sergeant assured him. "Half a candle was good enough for Arthur Burdett, let alone two oil lamps."

Hylton grunted. Two flickering oil lamps was not his idea of ideal illumination with which to inspect the scene of a murder. Quite apart from the inadequacy of the lamps there was something about their dim chiaroscuro, shifting with every puff of wind that blew through the gaunt house, that had an eerie effect on him. He had viewed quite a number of murdered men, and this was the first time that he had ever felt queer about it.

"What was that?" he asked sharply as something broke the silence quite close to their heads.

"Only a rat, sir," Sergeant White answered easily; "plenty of 'em here, I've no doubt. They scamper all night long in these old floors and ceilings."

Hylton grunted, and standing still looked slowly round the room, taking careful stock of everything.

The room was on the small side and almost square. The door entered it from one corner. The walls were practically bare, and the paper, which showed several large patches of damp, was peeling off in half a dozen places. The one outside wall contained two large old-

fashioned windows over which the curtains, moth-eaten and dirty, were now drawn. In the middle of the left-hand wall was a rather fine old fireplace which had evidently had no fire in it for long enough.

Towards the centre of the room, but rather nearer to the windows than the exact centre, was a round mahogany table, and near it a cheap chair of the ordinary kitchen kind.

The two lamps which shed such an uncanny, flickering light over everything stood one at either end of the mantelshelf. Between them was a clock with its glass broken and minus one of its hands.

"Anything been touched?" Hylton asked when he had taken all this in.

"Hardly a thing, sir."

"How many people have been in since it happened?"

"Lumsdale and myself, of course, and the doctor and the Chief Constable. That's all, I think."

"Nothing been taken out or brought in?"

"Er—only the sheet, Inspector."

Hylton's eyes travelled slowly back again to the principal adornment of the room, a humped-up, sheeted thing slouched in a huddle over the table.

"Take the sheet off, White," he said, "and let's have a look. Carefully."

Somewhat gingerly the Sergeant carried out the order.

"Fetch one of those lamps," Hylton ordered, and presently the thing on the table was shown up in a comparative intensity of yellow light.

Kingsley Hylton stared at it for a long time without speaking, indeed without moving. He was not unused to looking at death, but he found that custom did not stale the grimly infinite variety of the spectacle. He was mortal, and here was the end of mortality. The same grisly jester with the scythe was waiting for everybody.

Very cautiously he stretched out his hand, and taking hold of a lock or two of the still plentiful hair pulled the head up slightly.

"Rigor's gone off, of course," he said, half to himself. "A pretty useful sort of bash, Sergeant."

James White, studying afresh the ugly-looking dent in the forehead, running down into the eyebrow, part of which seemed to be torn away, and thickly clotted all over with dried blood, was inclined to agree.

"Yes, a hard smack, sir."

"Quite enough to kill a man, I suppose?"

"Doctor Chambers said he didn't think it would have killed a younger man, not outright; but apparently Mr. Burdett suffered with his heart, and he died from the shock as much as anything."

"Um. What the deuce makes a man's head weigh so heavy, Sergeant? All the brains, do you suppose?"

Sergeant White couldn't say.

Hylton let the heavy head go gently back into its resting-place. Somehow he took the disquieting fancy that it did not go there gladly. It was as though the fierce, savagely self-centred spirit who

had been so rudely dispossessed of his clay house was hovering near, indignantly anxious to take up possession again.

"'Time was when the brains being dashed out a man would die and there an end of it,'" the Inspector said reflectively. "Did you know, White, that there's something in Shakespeare to meet every possible occasion in life? But those were the good old times. Nowadays the brains being out is only the beginning of the matter. The question is, who did the dashing? This is *what* did it apparently."

"That's right, sir," Sergeant White said with assurance, as the Inspector picked up and examined a heavy wooden club that lay on a sheet of paper by the side of the table. "One of a pair, sir; you'll see the other on a nail on the wall between the windows."

The Inspector looked at the indicated spot and nodded.

"Doesn't look like a premeditated job."

"No, sir."

"Unless it was someone who knew these clubs were here."

"Well, it might be that, sir."

"Hallo, what's that?"

There was a noise in the hall, and White strode to the door to investigate.

"It's Andrew Lumsdale, Inspector," he announced, reappearing in the room.

"Good. Bring him in."

"Rough-looking devil," was Hylton's first thought

as he studied the close-cropped, almost convict-like head and the surly expression of the man who followed the Sergeant into the room.

Andrew Lumsdale was a powerfully built man of between forty and fifty. He was one of those beings who seemed soured by some perpetual and never satisfied grievance against life and mankind in general, and this sourness was reflected in the habitually sardonic temper of his speech. You might live with his sort for a year and never know what his pleasure was in life, nor indeed if he took any pleasure in anything, save in a certain grim humour at the follies and misfortunes of his fellows.

A good deal of this ran through Hylton's automatically analytical brain as he looked at the man; and yet (he went on to reflect) he had found out only too often in life that all men have their pleasures; in every mortal man lust and the love of life and the greed of gold work more or less powerfully, sometimes all the more strongly for being suppressed.

Lumsdale was a north-countryman, truculent by nature, subservient to none; he stood his ground, and from his green eyes gave back cold, scrutinizing glance for glance, as good as he got.

"What's your name?" Hylton asked.

"Andrew Lumsdale."

"What do you know about this?"

"Nowt."

Hylton smiled sweetly. "Come, Mr. Lumsdale," he said, "you must be able to help us a bit. What was your job here?"

" Servant to the old man. He wouldn't have anybody else—wouldn't pay 'em for one thing. I looked after him in the house, did a bit of cooking and such, and took a turn in the garden when I'd time—did everything, as you may say."

" How long have you been here? "

" Six years."

" Mr. Burdett had no other servants all that time."

" None."

" Did you get on with him well? "

" If he gave me the rough side of his tongue he got as good back, and that's how it was."

" Quite an amiable household, apparently."

" You can call it what you've a mind. I've been in better places, and worse."

" What were you before you came here? "

" Stud groom to Lord Menningham for twelve years."

" Why did you leave there? "

" Because I wanted to. I'm a free man."

" You speak your mind pretty bluntly, Mr. Lumsdale, don't you? "

" Always have done. Never found I've got on any the worse for it. Folks as don't like it can lump it, that's all."

" Perhaps you'll be equally outspoken about what happened on Monday? "

" Why not? "

" Were you here all day? "

" No. Monday's my half day off. Old Burdett

came back about twelve, or a bit after, and said he wouldn't want any lunch."

" Was that unusual? "

" No. Three days in the week he wouldn't have anything t'eat from breakfast till night, for fear of spending the brass."

" Um. Go on."

" I was doing a bit of chopping outside; when I'd finished that I had my bite of food in the kitchen about one. Two o'clock I looked in here to ask if he wanted anything——"

" What was Mr. Burdett doing then? "

" He set in that chair, same as he usually did, looking at some papers. He said he didn't want anything, so I got off."

" Did you notice anything unusual about him in any way—did he look ill or nervous or anything? "

" When he first came in he was a bit puffed, but that was because he had been hurrying back to see if his money was all right."

" What did you do when you left? "

"Caught the 2.40 bus into Morechester, the conductor'll tell you the same, I know him to nod to."

" I'm quite content with what you tell me, Mr. Lumsdale, for the moment," Hylton said gently.

" Aye, for the moment; but I thought you might like to know whom to go to when you get ferreting about after. The 2.40 bus to Morechester I caught; always do on a Monday."

" And at Morechester? "

" Went to the pictures. I mostly do that on a Monday too. The big place in the Square."

" A good programme? "

" Ah've seen worse."

" And after the pictures—what time were they over? "

" I came out about half-past five and then I went straight to the Crown."

" Was it open? "

" Aye, else I wouldn't have gone. Half-past five they open in Morechester, and that's the very reason I stayed in the pictures till then, see? "

" And how long did you stay at the Crown? "

" I played billiards there for best part of two hours. Jimmy Pratt, t'marker, will tell you the same. Then I had a bit of bread and cheese and some beer and started to walk home."

" Leaving there, when? "

" Between half-past seven and a quarter t'eight, I dare say, though I didn't notice particular."

" And then? "

" Then I walked all the way back here like I usually do. Just after nine it was when I got back."

" And you let yourself in? "

" What with? T'old man never let anyone have a key but hisself. And there was only one way to come in, and that was the front; everything else was kept as tight shut as the Bank of England. And the front door was always on a chain. I couldn't let meself in any more than you could. I

rang once or twice, and I thought it was funny that didn't do any good, because old Burdett had ears like a cat. Then I banged on the door a bit and nothing happened. Ten minutes I must have been ringing and banging. I didn't see the joke o' that. Dom that for a tale, I thought, keeping a man out in the cold all night; it'll cost you half a crown before I'm done with it. I went round to the back; all shuttered up and made fast and locked it was, just like it should be. Beggar that, I thought, but here goes; and I put my fist through the coal-house window and undid the catch, and I was inside in a couple of minutes."

Inspector Kingsley Hylton was watching his man keenly. " Go on," he said quietly.

" Ah thought I better come and see if the old boy was all right, so I came here—this was the only room he ever used bar his bedroom—and there he was lying over the table with his head bashed in and this club thing on the floor."

" Dead? "

" Dead as a door nail."

" Was there much blood about? "

" Well, you can see most of it now, these stains dried up here."

" Was it dry then? "

" No. Well, not as dry as it is now anyway. Thick like."

" What did you do then? "

" I was a bit put about at first. Then I saw the safe open——"

" Where's that? "

" I'll show you that in a minute if you like, sir," Sergeant White put in.

" Right-oh. Carry on, Lumsdale."

" I saw the safe open, and I thought, ' By gum, the old devil's copped it at last; someone's got t'brass.' I went over to the wall there and looked in the safe—it's locked again now, the police are afraid I'll steal it, I reckon—just out of curiosity. There seemed to be a tidy bit o' brass still in it, and I don't mind telling you I had half a mind to help meself to a bit. But I didn't, so doan't take on, mister. I let that be just as it was and I went and fetched Sergeant White here."

" Why didn't you telephone to him? "

Lumsdale actually laughed, a thin, sarcastic sound. " What with? A wireless or something, mister? " he asked. " You didn't catch old Burdett paying to have telephones put in Enderton Court."

" What time did you get to Sergeant White's? "

" Round about half-past nine, or a quarter to ten, I suppose."

" Um. Do you know of anybody who had any grudge against Mr. Burdett, Lumsdale? "

" Scores on 'em. They all hated him in the village because he never spent anything. Reckoned he ought to throw it about with both hands and keep half of 'em with charity, I suppose. What I say is if a man's got brass it's his own, and he's a fool to waste any."

" But you don't know of any quarrel with anyone actually? "

" I can't say as I do."

" What about this safe? "

" It's over here, Inspector," Sergeant White said. " Let into the wall by the fireplace. Papered to look like the rest of the wall, see? It was open when I got here with Lumsdale. I thought it best not to touch anything, but when the Chief Constable came he ordered an inventory to be made. I've got it in the office. It's a matter of three hundred pounds in notes and cash, as I said. Then the Chief locked the safe and he's still got the key."

" Um. Well, we can see inside that to-morrow, no doubt, if we want to. I'd like to look over the rest of the house."

For an appreciable moment Lumsdale was silent, then he answered, " What, now, mister? "

" Yes. Why not? "

Lumsdale shrugged his shoulders. " Well, I don't mind, if you don't," he said.

" Why should I mind? "

Lumsdale looked doggedly away. " Some folks might," he said.

Kingsley Hylton's tiger-like curiosity, which was always pacing up and down the inadequate cage of his mind, was instantly aroused.

" You interest me immensely, Lumsdale," he said. " You don't mean to tell me that you are afraid of ghosts? ".

Andrew Lumsdale turned and faced him squarely.

" I'll tell you this much, mister," he answered quietly, " and you can get all the laugh out of it you've a mind to, but there's rooms in this house I wouldn't sleep in, not if you doubled my money."

A queer silence fell on the three men for a moment, and a puff of wind from the dark house playfully lifted a corner of the white sheet that covered the thing on the table.

Kingsley Hylton was intrigued. He had never before to his knowledge been in a supposedly haunted house; indeed he was pretty well prepared to prove to you by logic and reason that no such thing as a ghost could exist.

" Come on," he said, " fetch one of those lamps, Sergeant, and we'll all have a look round."

James White dutifully picked up one of the oil lamps and the little procession of inspection moved off.

Enderton Court was built in the mid-period of Victorian industrialism. 1840 saw the foundations dug, a year and a half later the place was finished. It missed a good deal of the bastard, baronial Gothic which rose to its full height of vulgarity two or three decades later, but on the whole it was a multiplicity of rooms and great lengths of cheerless corridor, which possibly did not matter so much in the days when servants were cheap and plentiful. Such a place needs life and plenty of it, if it is to be at all bearable, and for half a generation Enderton Court had known little enough life. In one corner of it a savage, inward-eating spirit had sat

jealously huddled over an occasional gleam of begrudged fire, and somewhere in the outer regions a servant or two had passed a cold and comfortless existence; for the rest its big rooms were sheeted and silent, the playground of rats, the whispering gallery of every mournful wind.

It looked doubly deserted now as the three men made their way about, and the long shadows thrown by the swinging lantern rose and fell on floor and walls.

Even Inspector Hylton felt a certain eerieness from that damp, deserted mausoleum.

They inspected the ground floor thoroughly—the big drawing-room, the little drawing-room, the dining-room, the gun-room, the smoking-room, the vast kitchen quarters whose various and especial uses were now almost forgotten.

" Even a house agent would have a job to describe this in glowing terms," was Hylton's comment; " now what about the upstairs? "

" This way, mister," Lumsdale said briefly, leading the way up the fine, wide staircase.

" This is where the old man slept, and my room's three doors along."

Inspection was duly made of two bedrooms, which Hylton privately thought must be as bleak and uninviting as ever any human beings slept in.

" And the other rooms? " he queried.

" All empty. Bits of furniture in some of 'em—old boxes and the like—but for the most part empty."

"Well, we'll poke our heads in," the Inspector said cheerily, and they duly poked their heads in to find only too dismal a verification of Lumsdale's account.

"Can't say I altogether blame you for not falling in love with the place," was Hylton's comment.

"This part's all right," Lumsdale said. "We can go in the other wing if you've a mind."

"I've a mind to everything," Hylton assured him. "That's my one besetting sin in life—curiosity. Which way?"

"This way, mister." Lumsdale led them down a long corridor which turned sharply to the right at its end. "This is where all the servants used to sleep when the house was full like, I suppose."

"Anything interesting here?"

"Nowt as I've ever heard of, mister."

Kingsley Hylton was last out of the third bleak bedroom they visited, and for a moment, the Sergeant with the lantern being farther down the corridor, was virtually in darkness.

"Hallo," he cried sharply, "who's opened a window?"

Neither of the men ahead seemed to hear him. "Who's opened a window?" he called out more loudly, and there seemed to be a sort of sardonic satisfaction in the voice that floated back, "No windows been opened here for long enough."

It was an assurance that did not satisfy the Inspector. "Fetch the lamp back and let's have a look," he ordered, and the three men made a

silently thorough inspection of all the windows they could find. All were fastened, many shuttered.

" Why, did you hear something, Inspector? " Sergeant White asked when at last his superior officer seemed satisfied.

" No—I didn't hear anything," Hylton answered, " I just wondered." He caught sight for an instant of the grin on Lumsdale's queer face, and not for anything would he have added that for a brief space, ten seconds or more maybe, as he had stood alone in the darkness, he had felt across his cheek a chill, damp blast of air.

" Anything else you want to see? " Lumsdale asked when they regained the hall.

" No. I don't think so. Not at present. When's the inquest, Sergeant? "

" Friday morning, Inspector."

" Um. We shall see what that brings out."

" I can tell you that now, mister," Lumsdale said, a trifle unexpectedly. " Nowt."

A considerable experience of inquests inclined Kingsley Hylton privately to agree with this monosyllabic prophecy, but he did not say so; instead he said:

" Just tell me about that chain on the front door, Lumsdale. I'm not quite clear about that."

" Simple enough. Whenever I went out and old Burdett was alone, all the back was shut up and locked, like I've told you. I had to see to that. Then after I'd gone and banged the front door behind me, the old boy put the chain up. One of

those old-fashioned things, dated from the times of Jack the Ripper, didn't they? So I've heard tell, at any rate."

" Was it on when you came back? "

" Last Monday night d'you mean? "

" No, any ordinary night."

" Yes. I'd ring the bell and the old man would come shuffling over the hall with a candle and open the door two or three inches. Then when he saw who it was, he'd let me in, mostly without a word, and I'd have to put the chain up again after me."

" Now, last Monday night, *the* Monday night, when you went down to fetch Sergeant White, which way did you go *out*? "

" T'front."

" Was the chain in place or not? "

" No, I noticed that particular."

" Um. I see. Well, I don't think we need worry you any more to-night. We shall be up in the morning, of course. Good night."

" 'Night."

The Inspector found the sharp, frosty night air pleasant after the shuttered dampness of Enderton Court. He was cold and wanted exercise; Sergeant White seemed to be of the same mind and they swung along steadily, for the most part in silence.

Once Hylton said, breaking a long silence, " Do you believe in ghosts, Sergeant? "

" Yes, sir."

" You do? "

" I've never seen any convincing proof that there aren't any."

" Have you ever seen any convincing proof that two and two make four? "

" Mr. Einstein isn't so sure they do, is he, sir? "

Hylton laughed. " Well," he said, " I've never heard of a murder committed by a ghost before. It's a possibility which raises all sorts of interesting questions. What would you say, Sergeant, if it turned out along those lines? "

" It's something I wouldn't care to be mixed up in," James White answered quietly.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE Chinese have a proverb which says "the smaller the pond the bigger the ripple"; and another to the effect that "the stick of curiosity stirs up the mud of discontent"; and no doubt the Chinese philosophers as a body would have been delighted at the accurate way in which the microcosm of Hope Enderton justified their sage prognostications. It is not too much to say that for many days after the affair at Enderton Court the first waking thought in the mind of every Enderton man and woman was the murder—what was the latest news of it: what fresh discoveries would make deliciously grisly tit-bits of conversation during the day: and above all, who had done it?

All this was given added piquancy by the best sauce of all—the thought that somewhere in Hope Enderton a man or woman woke up—if indeed sleep had come during the night—with the questions burning in his brain, "Is there anything I have forgotten, overlooked? Will they ferret out something to-day? Will there be a knock on the door to-day, this morning, *now* . . . there, *Christ* . . . it's nothing, only the milk. . . ." But not the milk of human kindness, my friend, wherever you

are; mankind dearly loves a hunt. Men take dogs to badgers, sticks to rats, and all the complicated, crushing machinery of the law to their fellow men. . . .

The village had already achieved the fame of front page distinction in the papers; for, with Western Europe tottering to ruin and the whole world perched precariously on the verge of a suicidal volcano, there was a dire shortage of news, and papers welcomed a famous actress's divorce, or even the murder of a miser in an obscure village, as manna in Fleet Street.

Edward Perry at the Hoops was already running short of his week's beer and was forced to telephone to the brewery for increased supplies; this was partly due to the admirable drinking prowess of the three journalists who were quartered in the village; and partly to the fact that the almost legendary detective from Scotland Yard was staying in the inn, and, even if they weren't lucky enough to catch a glimpse of him, men felt somehow more intimately and importantly connected with events if they were for a short space only under the same roof as the great man.

What is one man's meat is another man's poison; and at the other end of the village the landlord of the Horseshoes contemplated a sadly diminished bar trade each evening with cynical disgust. "Sickening the way folks flock after these things nowadays," he would confide to his faithful remnant of customers, at the same time heartily hoping

that the next time anyone was murdered in Hope Enderton it might be in his own backyard.

There was, of course, a good deal of regret expressed superficially, and whenever men or women met, the worn-out phrases automatically rose to their lips: " shocking . . . awful . . . dreadful . . . bad business up at the Court . . ." and so on; but no one was really sorry. Life is such a fight for most people, and the getting of even enough money to escape disaster such an ever present problem and worry, that there can be little human sympathy for a man who has so much more than he wants and hoards it miserably. Arthur Burdett had no friends in Hope Enderton, nor indeed anywhere else; and he had quite a number of potential enemies, for a good score of the cottages in the village belonged to him, and he was the absolute pattern and exemplar of all that a landlord, even in his own interests, should not be.

There was a school of thought, regarded almost as disloyal by the vast majority of the villagers, that the crime was committed by someone outside Enderton altogether, a stranger who had nothing to do with the place.

This possibility was urged by Sergeant White when he called round, by order, to see the Inspector at the Hoops the morning after their first visit to Enderton Court.

Kingsley Hylton had just polished off two eggs and an outsize rasher of Wiltshire bacon and was sipping his extremely hot, though far from excel-

lent, coffee. He lit one of his long thin cigars and pushed his case towards the Sergeant.

White smiled. " No thanks, sir. That one yesterday nearly did for me."

" You find them a bit strong? Well, I suppose they are. They help you to think, you know, especially if you've got a slow brain like mine. What makes you imagine that it's somebody outside the village? "

" I only say it may be, sir."

" It's a possibility, but somehow——"

" And the last few days I've seen a couple of rough characters on the roads that didn't belong here."

" Tramps? "

" That class, sir."

" Um. Your theory is then: a tramp comes up to the door to beg, forces his way in, kills the old man, grabs a handful out of the safe and does a guy."

" It's possible, sir."

" All things are possible."

" And, of course, as like as not anyone begging on the roads would have heard some talk about Mr. Burdett being a miser and having something worth while up there."

" Um. Let's go and see what sort of a night friend Lumsdale had."

However sweet the quality of friend Lumsdale's slumber it had not served to soften in any way the pawkiness of his humour and the hardly short of

truculence of his bearing. He uttered a short, derisive laugh when he heard the Sergeant's theory.

" And 'ow would this tramp of yours get in, Sergeant? " he asked.

" Mr. Burdett would think it was you knocking at the door and go and open it."

" And when he saw it was someone he didn't know, he'd ask him to supper, I suppose? "

" A tramp might have forced his way in."

" Against the chain? " Lumsdale shook his head. " No, Sergeant. That's just exactly what the old skin-flint had the door put on the chain for each time. If someone came to that door as he didn't know, the old boy would no more let them in than fly to the moon, you can take that for Gospel."

Hylton was inclined to agree with this; he found a curious fascination in watching Lumsdale, and in the contrast between the man's downright speech and his shifty, uncertain cast of countenance.

Sergeant James White, however, was not entirely convinced, and he begged leave to prosecute a few inquiries on his own account.

"My dear fellow," Hylton urged him with a humorous outburst, " prosecute all the inquiries you like. Don't think I mind over-zealous subordinates. I love 'em. All I want to do is to sit in front of a good fire smoking one of those cigars you don't like and reading the everlasting miracle of Shakespeare. Then, when you've done all the dirty work, I weigh in and take the credit. Surely you know by now that's how the Service is run? "

Sergeant James White smiled unabashed, and disappeared about his business, and the Inspector devoted himself to an even more thorough examination of the room of the tragedy. It seemed clear that entrance had been gained by the door, for all the windows were securely fastened and bolted on the inside, and had been so, according to both Lumsdale and the Sergeant, on the night of the murder.

The noise of a car on the drive outside told the Inspector that the man he was waiting for had arrived; and presently the Chief Constable of the County was shown into the room by Lumsdale.

Major Thorpe was a man cast in the traditional mould of the Regular Army officer. Well-set-up, spruce, and evidently as fit at sixty as most men at forty-five. He was a little hot-tempered but perfectly just, and although a strict disciplinarian was popular with his men. He was keen on what he would, no doubt, have called the sporting side of the murder —the question as to whether the fellow who did it would get away from them or not—but he considered the whole affair altogether beyond the somewhat ordinary resources at his command, and was frankly very much relieved to have an expert on the job.

Hylton talked with him for ten minutes or so without adding appreciably to his meagre knowledge, except to learn from the County Criminal Investigation Department what he already feared, that the fatal club bore no decipherable fingerprints.

"Pretty cold scent, eh?" Major Thorpe asked.

The Inspector laughed. "It very often is, you

know," he said easily. "People have an idea that murderers invariably leave handkerchiefs behind with obligingly tell-tale laundry marks, or cigarette-cases stuffed with some exotic brand of smoke only obtainable at one particular shop; but as a matter of fact they don't. The distressing truth is that most detective work consists of laborious questioning, usually of the wrong people. On an average the investigation of every major crime means the examination of about eighty people and the asking of, roughly, eight thousand questions."

"Well, thank God you've got the job and not me," the Major said piously. "I've lost a day's shooting over the thing already. Eighty people—why, at that rate you'll be questioning half the people in Enderton."

"I mean to," Hylton answered, smiling.

"Good luck to you."

"Thanks. I suppose you can let me have two men up here all the time to keep undesirables away?"

"You can have all the men you want, Mr. Hylton; just let me know and I'll fix it. Do you want a car?"

"No, not a car. I'll just ferret about in my own way."

"Gang your ain gait, eh? And that's the way the miracles are worked."

Hylton smiled again, enigmatically this time, he hoped. He had no more idea than the man in the moon where the expected miracle was coming from, but he kept that under his hat.

The Major was impressed by the enigmatic smile.

"I expect you're on to something already, quietly, aren't you?" he said. "My word, when I see some of you chaps at work I know which side of the fence I'd sooner be on."

"Ideas come and go, you know," Hylton answered diplomatically.

Major Thorpe nodded. "Trouble with me is," he confessed, "that they go a damn sight quicker than they come. Well, let me know if you want anything."

Hylton promised to do so, and five minutes after the Major's departure he was walking back briskly towards the Hoops. He was not yet unduly worried by the almost complete absence of clues. There was no truer saying in the world, he was convinced, than "*murder will out.*" Your murderer has to go home some time. Maybe he gets home white and distracted; or he is much later than usual; or he talks strangely in a wild, half-boastful way. Or, if to murder he has added theft, there are suddenly pounds to burn where previously there were not pennies to rub together. All these things are known to somebody and get talked about in time. Inspector Kingsley Hylton already regarded the outwardly friendly and placid village of Hope Enderton as a secretive and hostile world, presenting a hundred false faces to him, lying with a hundred honeyed tongues. He must watch and wait, and observe and question. He must spread his net cunningly, and in due time the man with the blood on his hands would come willy-nilly to the bait. Almighty God, who has a particular horror of the

taking of life, had made human nature that way, and the Inspector was only too glad to fall in with the designs of so powerful an Ally.

It was lunch-time when he got back to the Hoops, and a meal was laid for him in the small back room already reserved for his private use.

Edward Perry brought in a jar of pickles as an agreeable adjunct to the excellent cold beef.

"Pickles, sir?"

"Good."

It took Perry a full minute to put the pickle jar on the table to his exact liking.

"They do say, sir," he blurted out at last, "that the old man's head was that knocked about you wouldn't recognize it, and that there's over five thousand pounds missing from the house."

Hylton swallowed a succulent piece of undercut and replied equably, "Quite a considerable body of people also say that the earth is not round, but flat," a reply which momentarily nonplussed the good Perry.

"Quite so, sir, quite so, sir," he said, colouring slightly. "Perhaps you'll ring if you want anything further."

The Inspector undertook to do this, but as a noble Stilton cheese, weighing about seven pounds, stood on the sideboard the question of ringing did not arise.

When a man is closeted alone with a mountain of exquisitely ripe Stilton it is a very difficult matter to decide exactly when the satisfaction of mere appetite ends and the almost boundless region of

insatiable desire begins. Kingsley Hylton was still exploring this pleasant borderland when the front door of his little room was burst open, and a wiry figure with the thin gaitered legs of the horseman and a green pork-pie hat came unceremoniously in.

"You this detective fellow?" he asked explosively.

"Which detective fellow?" Hylton replied. "Have some cheese?"

"No. Damn the cheese. The man looking after this murder business at the Court."

"That's my job at the moment."

"Right. My name's Reeves, Captain Patrick Reeves of Ferney House, and I might as well tell you that I was at the Court on the afternoon of last Monday and saw old Burdett there. What are ye going to do about it?"

Hylton had placed one of his long cigars in his mouth and was searching vainly for a light.

"Have you got a match, Captain?" he asked.

Reeves seemed annoyed rather than otherwise by this reception of his declaration of war, and he very ungraciously pulled out a box of matches and threw it on the table.

"Thank you. You say you were at Enderton Court on Monday afternoon?"

"Yes, I was."

"At what time?"

"About five; might be ten minutes either way, but thereabouts."

Hylton carefully lit his beloved cigar and nodded. He was rapidly turning over in his mind the con-

versation he had had that very morning with Doctor Chambers. Tubby little Chambers, practical and business-like for all his loquacity, had stated that on the telephone summons of Sergeant White he had gone from Ferney House to the Court, arriving there just after ten. He viewed the body straight away, say ten past ten at the latest. In his opinion death was due partly to the blow on the skull, partly to the shock consequent on the blow, and had taken place certainly two hours before he arrived, possibly four hours before. On being closely questioned by the Inspector on this point he had reaffirmed his strong opinion that death had taken place somewhere between six o'clock and eight on the fatal day.

Now, Inspector Hylton knew enough of theorists, especially of medical theorists, to mistrust them all; but even so, and supposing the doctor to be only approximately right, it brought the hour of the murder reasonably close to six o'clock, and here was somebody professing, indeed pugnaciously professing, to have seen Burdett alive at five, or even after.

"Was Burdett all right when you left him?" he asked.

"Sour as a crab apple, but that was his nature."

"You saw nobody else about the house?"

"Not a soul. I chose Monday to go up because I knew that ex-convict-looking man of his would be away, and I wanted to see Burdett alone."

"You called on a friendly visit, I suppose?"

Pat Reeves laughed. " I did not," he said, " and mighty few ever did at that house. If ye want to know, I called there for the express purpose of telling Arthur Burdett that he was a filthy-minded old roué and that his soul was as rotten as his beggarly body."

" You had a quarrel with him? "

" Ye can call it that if you like; I'll not dignify it with the name."

" What about, Captain Reeves? "

" I'll not tell you."

Kingsley Hylton looked steadily at his man, and the tall, wiry, blue-eyed Irishman looked as steadily back. Hylton knew the type well—gladly share his last penny with you if you took his fancy, and go to the stake sooner than help you if you didn't. Pleasant to work with, but beggars to drive.

" You may have to tell us, Captain Reeves," Hylton said quietly; to which Reeves replied grimly and sardonically:

" Make me."

The Inspector let that pass. " You might have told us about this earlier," he said.

" And I might not have told you at all," Reeves pointed out.

" It would have been very foolish not to."

" Maybe. What's between me and old Burdett is my own affair and—and nobody else's."

" You're wrong," Inspector Kingsley Hylton answered with a sudden new quality in his voice. " What was between you and the dead man is now

the affair of the law, and the law will not be trifled with."

" You're a deal keener on the law here than we are in Ireland, Inspector," Reeves said. " Arthur Burdett was a dirty, damned old good-for-nothing, and the world's no worse off because he's out of it. Ferney House you can find me at, when you want me. Good-day."

Reeves left as abruptly as he had arrived, and for a long minute Hylton sat staring at the banged door. . . . Burdett was seen alive by Reeves at five and he was murdered say between six and seven—it narrowed things down a lot. Just for a moment he was tempted to let his mind play with the speculation as to how much of Captain Reeves' aggressive honesty was real, how much make believe. . . . Suppose the Captain's story were true in every particular save one. Suppose he had omitted to say that just before taking his leave from Enderton Court he had picked a heavy club from its nail on the wall and broken his host's skull with it?

" . . . I called on the man; we quarrelled; I left him."

" What did you quarrel about? "

" I shan't tell you, it is too private."

A cunning move because, as any jury would instantly argue, no guilty man would admit the fact of quarrelling, being under no compulsion to do so. A long experience with human nature in all its moods had made Kingsley Hylton prepared to believe almost anything of his fellows . . . he

wondered whether Captain Pat Reeves, of such transparent honesty, was cool enough customer to sail such a tricky course, and he realized at once that if he were, it might be a very difficult job to catch him.

His speculations were interrupted by a tiny sound on the far side of the second door that led from his luncheon room. Hylton had not been through that door yet, indeed he had hardly noticed it, and a double curiosity now led him to examine what lay beyond. The Inspector had acquired a sort of instinct in some matters, and there was something in the nature of the noise which had attracted his attention that made him want to investigate it.

Quietly he tiptoed across the room and pushed the door open. It led into a well-proportioned, old-fashioned billiard-room where a tall, good-looking young man in riding kit stood half-way between door and table, ostentatiously chalking a cue.

He looked up when Hylton entered and nodded.

" Having a game? " the Inspector asked.

" I've just been knocking the pills about."

" Lie number one," Hylton thought; the click of ivory is curiously penetrating and unmistakable, and he was prepared to take an oath that no billiard balls had run on that table since he had started his lunch in the next room half an hour before. On the other hand, a young man comes into the billiard-room to see if there is a game going; he hears a voice raised in the next room; possibly he

recognizes the voice, or is interested in what he can hear of the conversation; he decides to postpone his solitary game and lays an inquisitive ear against the panel of the door. Hylton wondered. . . .

" I'll give you a game if you like, Mr. Shipley," he said.

" Right-oh," Dale answered. " I see you've got my name pat."

" Oh, Sergeant White has pointed out everyone in the place to me by now."

" And I suppose we're all suspect? "

" More or less. Spot or plain? "

" I'll take spot. I can tell you a lot of people who didn't do it."

" I've no doubt. If you could only tell me *all* the people who didn't do it the process of elimination would be complete. Shall we string for break? "

" Right-oh. You play much of this game? "

" Not enough to keep in good practice. I suppose you do? "

" I play a pretty decent stick as a rule," Dale admitted. He was a young man to whom such admissions came easily. Nature had made him fairly good at most sports, and imagination had turned him into a master; but there was no imagination about Inspector Hylton's proficiency at the game. It is a curious fact in life that ability at chess and at billiards often run together, and for all his talk about playing " a decent stick " Dale Shipley was struggling along in the fifties when

Hylton ran out with an unfinished twenty-seven.

Young Shipley did not like being beaten at anything; he was not a good loser and he put his cue away with only a pretence at good grace.

"By the way," Hylton asked casually, "do you agree with Captain Reeves' estimate of Mr. Burdett?"

"What, about his being a dirty damned old g——" Shipley broke off abruptly; he had walked into the trap before he had noticed it. "I heard him shouting out something in the next room," he concluded awkwardly.

"So it seems," Hylton concurred pleasantly. "I was just wondering whether you thought the same."

The young man's awkwardness increased. "It's nothing to do with me," he said shortly, and rattling his cue into its place he stalked out of the room.

The Inspector looked after him, wondering.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dale Shipley left the Hoops in a bad temper—not an uncommon frame of mind with that rather too good-looking young gentleman. He was annoyed at having been so ignominiously bested at billiards, still more annoyed at having walked into the Inspector's child-like booby trap. Easy enough, of course, to make pretence that he had innocently and unintentionally overheard the conversation in the next room; but impossible, nevertheless, to get rid of the substratum of uncomfortable knowledge. The Inspector knew, and Dale knew that the Inspector knew, that what overhearing there had been was not accidental.

"What the hell does it matter, anyway?" he tried to reassure himself crossly as he swung round the corner of Fielden Lane towards his cottage.

"Dale."

He turned sharply and looked into the big meadow on his right. The short winter afternoon was already beginning to end, and in the still grey light which presaged frost he could see a figure walking on the footpath, attended by a red setter in transports of ridiculous excitement.

His first instinct was to curse under his breath. "Oh, damn that woman, here she is again," but he

checked this; he felt that he could do with someone to talk to, and Nancy Featherstone would at any rate be sympathetic.

"Hallo, Nancy—here, Ranger, here."

Ranger bounded up and made ecstatic questing with his lovely nose of all the agreeable horsy smells on Dale's Newmarket leggings and boots; whatever difficulties might exist in the way of conversation for his divinity happily did not trouble him.

Nancy Featherstone felt embarrassed; there was only one reason why she should have chosen the path by Fielden Cottage for her afternoon walk, and she was certain that it was screaming itself aloud to high heaven. High heaven may have heard it, but Dale Shipley's ears were less keen; he was used to seeing Nancy about Enderton, tweed-clad and dog-attended; here she was once again, that was all.

"It's going to freeze again," Nancy said. "If it goes on there won't be any hunting."

Dale cocked an eye round the black winter woods and the sombre sky.

"Won't be much frost to-night," he said optimistically, being always capable of persuading himself that what he didn't want to happen, wouldn't.

"Are you going out on Friday, Dale, if they hunt?"

"I expect so."

"I hear you've bought a new horse."

"Who the devil told you that? You can't do a thing in this place without everybody knowing it in five minutes."

Nancy flushed. "I heard Saunders talking about it, that was all," she said.

Dale laughed unpleasantly. "That groom of yours knows everything, doesn't he? As a matter of fact I haven't bought it yet; at least I haven't paid for it."

"Nobody ever does pay for anything nowadays, do they? At least not on the nail."

"Depends how much money you've got, I suppose," Dale said gloomily. "I know I don't."

"*Ranger, Ranger.*"

"What's the matter with the dog?"

"I'm afraid he's gone into your garden, Dale."

"He won't do much harm there."

"My dear, you've no idea what that dog can do in a garden in five minutes. There he is. Ranger, come here, *come here, sir.*"

Ranger, impenitent but wary, duly came to heel as a result of the last strident order.

"My Gad, Nancy," Dale laughed, "you've got a voice on you just like a man."

A queer look crossed the woman's face for a moment as she bent over Ranger to snap his lead on. "I suppose you think that's a compliment," she said, as she straightened up. "Well, it must be getting on for tea-time for Ranger and me. Come on, Ranger."

"Why not come in and have a cup of tea with me?" Dale suggested. "I dare say Mrs. Somers will knock something together for us."

"It's very kind of you, Dale."

"Oh, I get sick of having meals alone," Dale said

chivalrously. "But I suppose you do too for that matter, don't you?"

"Sometimes," Nancy said quietly.

Dale led the way up the bricked path to the front door of Fielden Cottage, and Ranger, who had long since ceased to marvel at the strange inconsistencies of human beings, found himself free once more to roam in the forbidden garden.

Fielden Cottage was almost exactly twenty times as old as its owner and, many people would have said, just about twenty times as secure and dependable. It had been built in an age when men were happily ignorant of Minimum Specifications and Town Planning Acts and Preservation of Amenity Orders and all the other high-sounding bedevilments designed to hide ignorance of first principles. Fielden Cottage had been built by simple homely men of simple homely materials, with the result (astonishing to your steel and ferro-concrete theorists, whose ugly abortions are already beginning to wobble) that it still stood firm after some five hundred years, and fitted with perfect appropriateness into its surroundings.

It was one of the most attractive houses in Enderton, and many people envied Dale its possession. He lived there because it provided a roof, a bed and somewhere to eat, and because his late father had left it to him clear of all encumbrances—the one bright spot in an otherwise disastrous will.

"Mind your head," he said as he opened the front door and stood to one side, and Nancy duly ducked her head and crossed the threshold.

She had been in Fielden Cottage before, of course, and the boyish untidiness of everything, the entire absence of flowers and a dozen other details always curiously teased her heart. A log fire was smouldering in the brick grate, and Dale, unearthing a pair of bellows from somewhere, said in his casual way, "Nancy, see if you can get a bit of life into the fire, whilst I dig out old Mother Somers, will you?"

Nancy knelt on the hearthrug before the tantalizingly unswept hearth and, like a priestess at some strange rite, proceeded to induce the miracle of flame into the reluctant logs.

An odd business, she thought, the human heart . . . an astonishing business . . . "men are unwise and curiously planned"; the line came into her head from somewhere, written by a man, of course, but for once how true; unwise and curiously planned and blind, blind, blind . . . of all trivial things Dale could have asked her to do this business of mending his fire was the one which hurt her most and the one which she would have first chosen. . . . "Secretary of the Local Council for the Preservation of the Countryside (she puffed furiously with the bellows) . . . Captain of the Girl Guides . . . President of the Women's Institute . . . even a Vice-President of the Men's Sports and Social Club . . . Hon. Secretary of the Women's Unionist and Conservative Association (she gave an extra vicious puff with the bellows) . . . all silly, stupid, futile nonsense designed to fill time and heart when both were empty . . . gladly, much more than gladly, she would give them

all up on the instant, and her house and hunters and her eight hundred a year beside, if she could only have the right to kneel where she was now kneeling and blow life into her own logs smouldering on her own grate. She wanted a home and a husband and —no, she didn't; she wanted Dale and a child of Dale's. For an instant she sagged back on her heels and closed her eyes. Never, never before had she admitted that so openly and plainly to herself; it was a relief to set it clearly out in her thoughts . . . she wanted Dale and a child of Dale's. . . . Dale, lazy, incurably selfish, egotistical, rude . . . all these things, all these things; she knew the catalogue better than any who told it to her, but she also knew what apparently they did not know, could not see, that he was *Dale*, boyish, lonely, uncared for, unmothered . . . she would give up everything, if need be, the hunters, the eight hundred, just to hear him say . . . She opened her eyes and picked up the neglected bellows again and viciously resumed her task. . . . Men do not say these things, apparently, to some women; worse than that, it is bitterly humiliating to have to long, and hope against hope that they will say them, to be reduced to planning your walks near their cottages so that perhaps, if you're lucky, you will be seen and asked in to tea. . . . The thought crossed Nancy's mind that perhaps it was the eight hundred a year that was frightening Dale, yet . . .

"Hallo, how's the fire going?"

"Reviving splendidly."

"Good. You're a marvel, Nancy. I told Mrs.

Somers to dig out something special for tea as a lady had called on me, and she said it was high time I had a lady to look after me altogether—what do you think of that?"

"There, that will be all right," Nancy said, putting the bellows to one side and rising to her feet. "Where's Ranger?"

"Oh, God knows; knocking about somewhere; you fuss about the garden as if it was your own, Nancy. Here's Mrs. Somers with the tea."

Mrs. Somers, flurried by the unusual excitement of company, had risen nobly to the occasion, and as much food as six people could have comfortably eaten arrived in great style.

To have been married for thirty-eight years, borne fourteen children and have buried your husband might be held by some of the modern fainthearts to be a fill of romance. Perhaps they were made of sterner stuff in the last generation; at any rate under the crinkly black of Mrs. Somers' best (and apparently only) blouse beat a heart as incurably romantic as ever. She was all agog to see who Mr. Dale's visitor could be; and even when it turned out to be the only too familiar Miss Featherstone she did not allow herself to be unduly disappointed, but reflected how more than once she had said, and said in company which no doubt would handsomely recall her words if need be, that it was high time Miss Featherstone thought of getting married and gave up all these committees and things.

"Good afternoon, miss."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Somers."

"I 'ope you be keeping well, miss."

"Yes, thank you. How are you, Mrs. Somers?"

Mrs. Somers put the tea-tray down with careful deliberation. Here was a matter which warranted close attention. At the age of sixty-eight she had as much resiliency, toughness, vitality, spirit and general healthiness in her body as most townswomen of half her age. But she did not think so.

"Well, it's my legs, miss," she said.

Nancy nodded. She knew practically all there was to know about Mrs. Somers' legs. At the Women's Institute and other places she had grown used to hearing long and dramatically detailed accounts of them. But, on her native heath, Mrs. Somers was not going to be put off by a mere nod.

"It's my legs, miss," she repeated firmly; "they don't seem to be what they used to be really. Doctor Chambers says it's the rheumatism, but I often wonder how much he knows. You see it isn't as though it was just in the damp weather or anything of that. As a matter of fact I often tell my daughter at Coxton whenever I wash them they feel better for a bit. It's as though——"

"Go and see if you can find that dog of Miss Featherstone's," Dale cut in loudly, "and give it a bowl of tea in the kitchen."

"Yes, sir."

"Weak tea."

"Yes, sir."

Mrs. Somers, and her legs, retired in a state of

somewhat ruffled dignity; and Nancy, though she could not help laughing, was forced to expostulate with Dale.

"You shouldn't have cut her short so rudely, Dale, she loves talking about her legs."

"But I don't love hearing about them. If there's one thing in the world which seems completely void of all attraction to me it's old Mother Somers' legs —though I suppose—— Oh, well, have some tea, Nancy; here, you pour out, you're better at this sort of thing than I am."

Nancy duly dealt with the problem of tea and wondered, not for the first time, why it is that when men live alone their bread and butter is nearly always too thick to eat.

"Have you heard anything more about the business at the Court?" she asked.

"No," Dale answered shortly. "Why should I?"

"I just wondered. Everybody seems to have a new theory about it whenever you speak to them."

"I don't go in for theories," Dale answered virtuously. "As a matter of fact I shouldn't be surprised if you find that Pat Reeves was the last person to see the old miser alive."

"Captain Reeves? Why?"

"I've got an idea he went up to the Court on Monday afternoon."

"Whatever makes you think that, Dale?"

"I just *do* think it, that's all," Dale said, childishly pleased with the air of mystery he had succeeded in inducing into the conversation.

" But why on earth hasn't he said anything about it? "

" I don't know," Dale answered slowly, " I wonder. But he came home early from hunting that afternoon, if you remember——"

" Yes, but——"

" I hope this damn frost won't hold till Friday," Dale said in his acrobatic, conversational style. " I want to try that new mare."

" You have bought one then? "

" I haven't paid for her—still, I suppose that sort of thing doesn't worry you, Nancy. I often wonder if you realize how lucky you are; you've got a couple of hunters and a nice place, and everything you want."

" More tea, Dale? "

" Thanks; a bit stronger this time."

Nancy took the proffered cup and filled it in silence . . . rude, egotistical, blind, everything that anyone ever said about him, and yet somewhere, behind it all, was something . . .

" Is that all right, Dale? "

" Yes, thanks, that's fine."

Dale shot a more careful look at his guest as she leant forward and handed him his cup. An entirely new train of thought concerning her had suddenly sprung up in his head. It was commonly supposed in the village that Nancy had between seven hundred and a thousand pounds a year of her own . . . very nice too, Dale reflected thoughtfully . . . he had never before in his life regarded

Nancy Featherstone in the light of a woman, he had known her too long and, somehow, always considered her essentially uninteresting; but as a matter of fact this afternoon she didn't look half bad, and she certainly knew how to ride. . . .

"Cigarette, Nancy?" he asked, and his hand went automatically to his waistcoat pocket, but it returned empty, his usual swagger silver cigarette-case was not there and he had to fish out a shabby-looking yellow packet from a side pocket.

"Thank you, Dale."

"You smoke a good deal, don't you?"

"Um. Too much, I'm afraid."

"Good heavens, what does it matter? Life's short anyway."

Nancy laughed at this newly found philosopher . . . still it was true enough, of course, short and hurrying past, that strange, dark stream . . . whence . . . whither? Nobody knew. And *why*? Again nobody knew. And in the passage of it so much cruelty, so much stupidity, so much heartache; yet lighted sometimes by golden moments. For half an hour now she basked in unwonted sunshine. Never had she known Dale so friendly before; all his rudeness and boasting, all the not-yet-vanished schoolboy fell away and the charm that always lay behind that rather sulky face was uppermost. They talked easily and quietly, almost instinctively slipping into their mood by stages that Nancy could hardly recall when afterwards she went back slowly over the scene. The grey and hoddern winter's

day had vanished, but Dale would not have the light turned on, preferring to sit by the flickering flame of the now crackling fire; and Nancy thought: "This is how a man and woman should sit, by their own fireside, when they are wrought home and the cares and troubles and hostility of life are shut out from their own small world. This indeed *is* life, this hardly won and jealously guarded patch in the vast and unkindly jungle of the world."

Such moods, seemingly substantial and enduring at one moment, have somehow vanished in the next beyond recall, as whole white cities, embattlements and towns will vanish from the sky at a mere puff of wind. Somehow the conversational needle swung round to its inevitable north, and with the mention of Enderton Court and what had happened there illusion left the scene.

"Did you see your uncle after that row you had with him last week, Dale?"

"What row?" Illusion had gone now with a snap.

"Why, last week. I met you in the fields behind the Court, and you told me you'd just seen your uncle and how trying he was, don't you remember?"

Dale stared at her so long in the firelight that for a moment she was almost afraid.

"Don't you remember, Dale?" she asked, laughing.

"Yes—I remember." He had told her, and he had completely and utterly forgotten even meeting

her then; he cursed his stupid tongue which was always ready with the latest thing that had happened to him. " We didn't have a *row*, of course, and as a matter of fact I don't think I've mentioned it to anybody else."

" If you like you can consider that you didn't even mention it to me," Nancy said with a sudden smile.

" I'm very sorry to disturb you, sir, but if you please——"

" Don't be a fool, woman," Dale growled. " You're not disturbing anyone. Come in and switch on the light."

Mrs. Somers duly banished the friendly fireglow with the merciless efficiency of electricity, and Ranger, in such paroxysms of delight that he might have been separated from his goddess for half a lifetime, made a tumultuous entry.

" What is it? " Dale asked.

" Please, sir, there's someone to see you."

" Who is it? "

" Mr. Lawson from the Court lodge, sir."

In the middle of replying to Ranger's ecstatic lunacies Nancy happened to glance up at that moment and was astounded to see all the colour suddenly drain from Dale's face. It was as though he had opened an unexpected telegram bearing the worst news in the world.

" Tell Mr. Lawson I'll—I'll see him in a minute," he said at last.

Nancy jumped to her feet. " I must be going,"

she said. " Thank you so much, Dale, for—for tea, and—and everything."

" That's all right, Nancy. Very pleased you could come in. Good-bye."

" Good-bye, Dale. I—I——"

They stood facing one another for a moment on the front-door step.

" What is it? " Dale asked almost harshly.

Nancy wanted to tell him that not for the world would she say anything to anybody about their meeting in the fields the other day and about what he had told her of his quarrel with his uncle; but for some reason or other she couldn't.

" Nothing, Dale," she said awkwardly. " I just wanted to say ' thank you,' that was all. Come on, Ranger. Good-bye, Dale, see you out on Friday, I suppose? "

" Probably."

Dale waited until she had reached the wicket gate, where she turned and waved shyly to him, and then shutting the door he went back to what awaited him in Fielden Cottage.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN tea was over and done with in Fielden Cottage and Nancy Featherstone, attended by the still exuberant Ranger, was making her somewhat unhappy way home, Detective Inspector Kingsley Hylton rapped eagerly on the door of the police cottage in Hope Enderton.

He had been for a long tramp during the afternoon as an aid to thought, and was mentally and bodily stimulated in consequence. At that moment the Inspector's mind was filled, almost to the exclusion of everything else, with visions of a lightly boiled egg and large slices of thick, white bread and butter.

The door was opened to him by a woman whom he had no difficulty in recognizing. He had seen her photograph once already, and attractive though it had been he had to confess that the reality was far more attractive still.

Alice White was a finely made woman of about thirty-six. She was broad-shouldered, generous-breasted, broad-hipped; in colouring she was very dark, almost as though she had a touch of the barbaric beauty of the Romany about her, and when her full, free lips parted in laughter they showed magnificently white and even teeth.

"Friend White knows where to pick 'em, apparently," was the Inspector's unspoken comment.

"Did you want to see Mr. White?" the woman asked pleasantly.

Hylton introduced himself and was instantly made welcome.

"Oh, come in, please, Mr. Hylton. I'm sorry I didn't know you. I've heard a lot about you already, of course. Jimmy is sure not to be long; I expect him back any minute now; he's gone off on some job or other about this awful murder business, I expect."

"He's gone off on a wild-goose chase, I'm afraid," Hylton said laughingly as he stepped into the house. "At least I think he has; but you never know. It's his admirable devotion to duty which made him go, not me. Do you realize what a painstaking husband you have, Mrs. White?"

Alice White laughed and showed her even, gleaming teeth. "I expect he's very much the same as any other husband," she said; "when he isn't at home you miss him, and when he is he's a nuisance."

The Inspector smiled in response and sat down, doing his best to look like a man who is in sore need of a cup of tea.

His histrionic powers were evidently considerable, for the very next thing Alice White said was, "Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. Hylton?"

Kingsley beamed. "I should not only like it," he said, "I should probably die without it, and, Mrs. White——"

"Yes?"

"——if you want me to remember you in my will—though precious little good that will do you—catch a hen and shake it well until an egg appears and then boil same lightly, would you?"

Alice White gave a peal of cheerful laughter. "Boil you an egg for tea? Of course. As a matter of fact Jimmy often likes one himself. If you make yourself comfortable here I'll run into the kitchen and get it done in no time."

Hylton had a horror of eating alone any more than was absolutely necessary.

"Can't I have my tea in the kitchen," he begged, "and watch you deal with the egg?"

Sergeant White's wife, disappearing through the door, stopped and looked over her shoulder. "Of course you can," she said, "if you really want to. I'd like it," and she treated Hylton to a slow, appraising smile which he found slightly disconcerting.

The egg was boiled and duly eaten, together with three slices of bread and butter of precisely the right thickness, before James White's footsteps sounded in the house. He was a trifle taken back to find the Inspector in the kitchen, and started to remonstrate with his wife about it.

"Please," Hylton begged. "It's entirely my fault. I insisted on poking my way in here and spreading my clumsy masculine carcass all over Mrs. White's nice tidy kitchen, and I hereby give her leave to say aloud all the things she has been thinking of me for the past twenty minutes."

"They might make you blush, Mr. Hylton."

"Well, no one can say fairer than that," the Inspector laughed. "Any news, Sergeant?"

White was still faintly repressive. "Shall we go into the other room, sir, and talk there?" he suggested.

"Just as you like. A thousand thanks, Mrs. White, for the tea. I shall make specific mention of that egg and bread and butter in my official report."

Alice White laughed again; she liked men who talked freely and had a bit of fun about them and laughed occasionally.

The two men settled down in the front room which was given over to White's official capacity.

"Do you object to smoking in the office?" Hylton asked, and White smiled thinly.

"You do as you like, sir," he answered, looking on in silence whilst the Inspector drew out and lovingly lit one of his thin black cigars, "rolled," as he pointed out in a eulogistic aside to the Sergeant, "on the bare thighs of Cuban women."

Sergeant White seemed unmoved even by this added exoticism.

"About the murder, sir——" he began.

"Ah, yes, the murder—I knew there was something. Go ahead, Sergeant."

"I haven't had any luck, sir."

"Where have you been?"

"I've been to Morechester, Fanum and Fentown Poor Law Institutions——"

"That means workhouses, doesn't it?"

"That's it, sir. Only you mustn't call 'em workhouses now, it offends people's sensibilities——"

"That's the mention of work, I suppose."

"I dare say. I thought I'd look through the casual wards and see if by any chance they had any of the chaps I spotted in the village a day or two back."

"Any luck?"

"No, sir. Drew blank everywhere. I called at the Morechester Station and they let me see a couple of toughs they've got in the cells for vagrancy, but they weren't my men."

"You've still got a soft spot in your heart for the 'outsider' theory, Sergeant."

"Well, sir, I can't think of anyone in the village who *could* do it."

The Inspector carefully knocked the ash off his cigar. "Can't you?" he asked. "I can. Several. *Anybody* in Hope Enderton could have done it, Sergeant, and what's more quite a few of 'em would have some sort of motive."

"But everybody's going on just the same——"

"Good heavens, man, what do you expect? You don't think that whoever did it is going to pack a handbag and suddenly bolt, do you?"

James White looked slightly sheepish.

"I suppose not," he said.

"Why, if anybody, *anybody*, in this place did a sudden flit I'd have a warrant out for their arrest to-morrow, man or woman, just on spec."

"I—I don't think a woman did it, sir."

"Well, you must know more about it than I do.

As far as I can see at the moment it might have been anyone, including Lumsdale's ghost. Anyone, that is, except an outsider. I don't think you've attached enough importance to the business of that chain on the front door, White. Just think for a moment of the position: the miserable old skinflint is sitting there half frozen because he won't afford a fire and probably counting up the money in his safe and wondering what it feels like to be J. D. Rockefeller. The bell goes, or there's a knock at the door. He doesn't expect Lumsdale back so early, and he goes to see who it is. He opens the door as far as his precious chain will allow it, three or four inches. He looks out. If he sees somebody he doesn't know from Adam, some tough-looking citizen who starts to beg for money, d'you imagine the old boy would ask him to come in and help himself? Not on your life. You can say it's humanly possible, I suppose, but it quite definitely isn't humanly probable. No, one thing we can be pretty certain of is that whoever came to the door was somebody that Arthur Burdett knew."

"I suppose so, sir."

"And what's more, somebody that he wasn't afraid of. We know that the old boy had his safe open in that front room, and if the visitor at the door had been anyone that he didn't like the look of, even if he knew whoever it was, you can bet your boots he'd have gone back and shut that safe before ever he took the door off the chain. Don't you agree?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I do, sir."

"The only thing we know for certain in this case

so far is the character of old Burdett. We can build on that to a certain extent; we can use it as a sort of foot-rule, and of any two theories that crop up we must temporarily reject the one that is directly in contradiction to it. If——"

The insistent shrillness of a bell interrupted Hylton, and the Sergeant moved across the room and carried on one of those telephonic monologues which are so exasperating to the listener-in.

"That was Hanley & Payne of Morechester," the Sergeant announced as he replaced the receiver.

"Who may they be?"

"Mr. Burdett's solicitors, sir."

The Inspector cocked his ears. "What do they want?"

"Mr. Hanley has only just got back from France, sir, so of course he didn't know anything about this business. He wants to come over and see the police about Mr. Burdett's will; he says it's urgent."

"Is he coming now?"

"Yes; his clerk said he was starting straight away by car."

"How long will he be?"

"He shouldn't take more than a quarter of an hour, sir, if he hurries."

Mr. Hanley, or rather Mr. Hanley's chauffeur, evidently did hurry, for twelve minutes exactly had gone by when there was a peremptory knock at the door and the Sergeant was showing the round-faced, round-bellied, round-shouldered little man into the office.

"This is Detective Inspector Hylton from Scotland Yard."

"How d'you do, sir, how d'you do," Hanley fussed. "Very pleased to find somebody in authority here, very pleased. 'Pon my soul I don't like this sort of thing. I've never been mixed up in anything like it before."

"You're not going to tell us you did the murder, are you?" Hylton asked.

Little Hanley shot a startled look at him as though he were really afraid of falling into the clutches of the law. He looked so indignantly expostulate that Hylton burst out laughing.

"All right, Mr. Hanley, don't pay any attention. It's only my joke. The Sergeant's getting used to me already, he hasn't even smiled. What was it you wanted to see us about?"

Solicitor Quinton Hanley belonged to the old school, he evidently did not appreciate levity in the law.

"I should like to sit down," he said solemnly.

"Of course. Shift that chair over, White; that's the idea. Now, Mr. Hanley, make yourself comfortable."

Making himself comfortable was a thing that Quinton Hanley seemed good at. He crossed his short, stumpy legs so that his well-lined belly bulged out in a neat, little bow-window effect. His short, podgy fingers, one of which bore a heavy signet-ring, drummed quietly on the arm of his chair.

"I should first of all like you to understand," he

said, " that I hardly know whether I'm acting in a professional manner or not. Such a thing as this is, happily, so unusual, unique I may say, that I don't quite know what best to do. I——"

" Just tell us anything you can that might help," Hylton said, " and never mind about etiquette. There's a sort of etiquette about taking other people's lives, you know, and whoever hit Arthur Burdett over the head with that club didn't pay much attention to it. The law, Mr. Hanley, must and will know all there is to be known, so go ahead."

" Er—just so," little Hanley said, with another of his startled glances. " Well, please understand in the first place that I was called away on sudden business to Paris last Friday. I needn't go into the details of it, but it happens that our firm has a French connection and it is sometimes necessary to go over there in a hurry. I tell you this simply to explain why it is that you have not heard from me before."

" Just so."

" I didn't get back to London until early this morning, and it was after midday before I was at the office in Morechester and heard the shocking news."

" Arthur Burdett was a client of yours? "

" He had been for many years, though owing to his—er—peculiarities we transacted very little business for him. But on the twelfth of this month,

that is only six days before the—er—before the—er—the—er——"

" The murder."

" Before Mr. Burdett's untimely end, he came unexpectedly into our office in Morechester."

" Go on," the Inspector said quietly.

" It would be about three o'clock that he came in as far as I can remember, and he demanded to see me at once."

" What did he want? "

" He wished to see his will, which was the one document belonging to him that we kept. I instructed my clerk to bring it from the safe——"

" And what did Mr. Burdett do with it? "

" I regret to say that he tore it into a number of small pieces and threw it on to the fire. He was a man of violent disposition, but I have seldom seen him in a worse temper than he was then; in fact I was afraid he would have a stroke in my office, which would have been very awkward, very awkward indeed——"

" What happened next, Mr. Hanley? "

" Why, Mr. Burdett instructed me there and then to draw up a new will. When I heard its terms I protested and begged him to reconsider the matter, but there was never any arguing with Arthur Burdett, he was one of the most self-willed men I ever knew and he would have the will drawn up and executed on the spot." Quinton Hanley paused and looked over the top of his round, gold-rimmed glasses. " And it is that document, Mr.

Inspector," he said, " that I have with me at the moment."

" Dig it out," Hylton urged, " and let's have a peep at it."

A spasm crossed Quinton Hanley's face at these unlegal expressions; he paused with his fingers on the buckle of a black leather attaché-case.

" I want it to be clearly understood," he said almost severely, " that I am doing this on your orders and authority as a police officer and that no initiative rests with me in the matter whatsoever. Do you agree? "

" Dear Mr. Hanley," Hylton laughed, " a policeman's life is practically one long round of irregularities—the Sergeant here would tell you the same —it's like being a moral theologian, you find out just how near the wind you can sail without being upset. I'll take full responsibility for looking at the will, so go ahead."

" Very well." The mere familiar feel of a legal document seemed to give little Hanley more confidence, and clearing his throat he read aloud:

" ' This is the last will and testament of me, Arthur Claydon Caldershott Burdett, of Enderton Court, Hope Enderton, in the county of Sussex, made this twelfth day of January, in the year of Our Lord, nineteen hundred and thirty-six. I hereby specifically revoke the will and testament made by me on the twenty-second day of February, 1922. I appoint my solicitor, Quinton Eustache Hanley, of the firm of Hanley & Payne, Morechester, to be

my executor, and I direct that all my debts and funeral expenses shall be paid as soon as reasonably possible after my decease——' I insisted on that clause being included," Mr. Hanley said almost fiercely.

" So far it's all cackle," Hylton said. " When do we come to the 'osses? "

" The gist or vital essence of the matter," Quinton Hanley said repressively, " now follows. The wording, you will please understand, is exactly as Mr. Burdett wished it himself: 'In my previous will I left all my property and possessions whatsoever to my half-nephew Dale Shipley, but owing to that young man's insufferable rudeness, his bad-temper and even threats used towards me this day, I have decided that he shall not benefit by my death to the extent of one penny. All my property and possessions whatsoever therefore I hereby give and bequeath to Andrew Lumsdale, my man-servant, at present in my employ, who at least is reasonably honest and keeps a civil tongue in his head.' And that," said Quinton Hanley, as he folded the document carefully and put it back in its long envelope, " is all."

The Inspector whistled; he was beginning to be excited. " Well, it's a pretty good beginning," he said. " Who witnessed this will, Mr. Hanley? "

" Two of the clerks in my office. It was witnessed, and duly executed, there and then."

" Did young Shipley know about it? "

" That I can't say. But I am afraid it would be

very unlike Arthur Burdett to do anyone a bad turn and not tell them about it. He took a malicious pleasure in that sort of thing."

Hylton nodded; he could imagine that to be true well enough.

"And Lumsdale, did he know?"

"There again I can't say."

"How much was the old boy worth?"

"It will not be easy to arrive at an exact total of the value of Mr. Burdett's property and possessions, he was so extremely secretive about most things. But from what I know already as his legal adviser I should be very much surprised if the total is less than sixty thousand pounds."

"Sixty thousand! Then Lumsdale's a rich man."

"It would appear so—at any rate he will be comfortably off."

"A damn sight more comfortably off than I am," Hylton said. "How much used the old miser to keep in his safe up at the house?"

"I haven't any idea what Mr. Burdett did about that. I have heard rumours, of course, that there was a very considerable sum there, but these things are usually exaggerated in popular report."

"Um. When will this will be made public, Mr. Hanley?"

"When I, as executor, apply for Probate."

"Well, don't start applying yet," Hylton said crisply. "We want to keep all this under our hats for a bit."

"I hope I appreciate the value of discretion as

much as anybody," Quinton Hanley said with dignity as he picked up his black attaché-case and rose to his feet.

"I feel that I have done my duty by coming here," he said, "and however unpleasant a task may be that feeling is some sort of consolation. I wish you good evening, gentlemen."

He bowed, not without a sort of comic dignity, and, attended by Sergeant White, made his way out to his car.

When the Sergeant came back into the office he found Kingsley Hylton pacing up and down animatedly, an unlit cigar between his lips.

"By gad, Sergeant, this makes you think a bit," he cried.

"You consider it very important, sir?"

The Inspector glanced at James White almost in annoyance. For a man who had promised well on first acquaintance the Sergeant was exhibiting some painful patches of stupidity.

"Well, damn it all, man," he exploded, "it gives us what we haven't had a ghost of yet—real motive. It supplies the *cui bono* answer. Two motives, for that matter, and two of the strongest, greed and anger. We must look a little more closely into Andrew Lumsdale's story—no wonder he found it convenient to talk about ghosts. And what do you suppose Mr. Dale Shipley was doing that evening?"

"I happen to know, sir, that he was dining with Captain Reeves."

"So do I . . . with Reeves, eh? . . . and I also

happen to 'know' that Andrew Lumsdale spent the entire time from, say, three till half-past seven in Morechester; but, Sergeant, I don't quite trust that knowledge now. I'm going to have a busy day tomorrow. Do you play chess?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Good. Perry said you did. Let's have a game now; it's wonderfully good for clearing one's brain."

A little surprised, but nothing loath, White answered, "All right, sir. Shall we go into the living-room?"

"Anywhere you like, so long as I can smoke there."

In the living-room White produced the board and men from a drawer and set them out on the table; then each man settled down, and there was something about the other's attitude that warned Kingsley Hylton he might be in for a surprise.

Very little conversation was heard for the next eighty minutes, and two of Hylton's long cigars had gone up in smoke before James White leaned back and, with something approaching guarded triumph in his voice, said, "I think you'll find that's mate, Inspector."

Kingsley Hylton's anticipated surprise had materialized; secretly he was just a shade chagrined; he rather prided himself on his chess, and it was some time since he had been bested in a game. He surveyed the situation carefully for a full two minutes before he had to admit with a laugh, "Mate it is, Sergeant; you're too good for me."

"Oh, just a bit of luck," James White said

modestly, but it was humanly impossible to keep a hint of pleasure out of his voice.

"Luck for the law, eh?" Hylton ruminated. "Well, I dare say we shall need it all before we've finished with this case. I'll be round in the morning, Sergeant."

"Very good, sir."

At the door Hylton turned. "Oh, I say, I nearly forgot the most important thing of all. Say good night to Mrs. White for me, will you? and don't fail to thank her for that excellent tea."

"All right, Inspector."

"Good night."

"Good night, sir."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"ANOTHER half pint, please," Inspector Hylton said—"in a tankard"; and he smiled amiably at the pretty, fluffy-haired little piece of goods who was serving him. Kingsley Hylton had something of a philosopher's outlook on life, and, even in the midst of serious business, he saw no reason to forgo the amusing human contacts which he so enjoyed.

"Anything more to eat?" the Crown barmaid inquired.

"No, thanks, my dear, I'm afraid of my figure, but if you can stand the smell of cigar smoke I'll light this thing."

"Oh, I love the smell of a cigar," the girl assured him; "seems so posh like, doesn't it?"

Kingsley Hylton lit one of his long, thin, black peculiars and considered the word "posh." Where did it come from? and what did it originally mean? Goodness only knew; one of the many strange pieces of verbal flotsam and jetsam thrown up on the beach of the Great War. . . . He dismissed it from his mind, he had other things to consider. . . .

It was nearly two o'clock and he was seated in the bar of the Crown Inn, Morechester, and, as he had foretold the Sergeant it would be, his morning had been a busy one. It had been a morning devoted

entirely to Mr. Andrew Lumsdale, and to the testing of Mr. Andrew Lumsdale's story.

He drew a pencil from his pocket and began to tick off points in a sort of bastard shorthand of his own devising on the back of an envelope.

1. Captain Reeves *says* that he left Enderton Court at five or ten past, and that A. B. was then alive—this may or may not be true. Can it be checked?

2. Lumsdale's story—— Here the Inspector paused and considered afresh all he had done that morning.

The West Sussex Transport System Limited had imposing head offices in Morechester, and not only imposing new offices but (which is by no means an inevitable corollary) pleasant and courteous people in them. Hylton's official card had very soon brought the entire place at his disposal, and before long he was interviewing Frederick Warner, the conductor of the 2.40 bus from Hope Enderton to Morechester on the fatal Monday.

Mr. Fred Warner (who thrilled his girl that evening with an account of the interview) was a broad-shouldered, healthy young man of twenty-two or three. Yes, he was the conductor of the 2.40 out of Enderton on Monday afternoon; he got other routes sometimes, but Morechester-Enderton and back was his usual run. Yes, he got to know the regulars on it pretty well; it wasn't what you would call a busy route, except Saturdays they filled up a good bit. Yes, he knew Mr. Lumsdale, Mr. Burdett's man, well by sight; "a bit of a cross-looking fellow," he

described him. Mr. Lumsdale nearly always came on the 2.40 bus on Mondays; he certainly did last Monday; it was easy to remember because he came over the fields in front of the Court, and the bus had to stop especially for him by the stile, not a regular stopping place. He thought Mr. Lumsdale usually went into the pictures on a Monday, though he couldn't be certain. . . .

Warner's evidence was straightforward and unhesitating and carried conviction. At the Regal ("the big place in the Square," as Andrew Lumsdale had described it) the Inspector's luck petered out. Neither the ruby-faced admiral on duty on the steps, nor the pert young thing in the pay-box knew anything about Mr. Lumsdale, nor did the Inspector's description of him strike any dependable response. Off then to the Crown, where the production of his card had worked wonders with the landlord. It is a moot point whether the licencees of public houses or motorists are more persecuted as a body by the police; but the licencees have their living at stake and so probably get rather the worse time. At any rate the sight of an ordinary blue police uniform near his premises is sufficient to throw even the most law-abiding into agonies of apprehension, and the presence of a big pot from Scotland Yard reduced Mr. William Trotter to humiliating depths of servility.

The Crown was famous for its billiard-room, and Jimmy Pratt, the marker, was a character in the town. Not detectives, death, or the devil himself would have flustered Jimmy Pratt much. He

answered all Hylton's questions like the sharp little Cockney sparrow that he was.

Mr. Lumsdale? Certainly he knew Mr. Lumsdale; one of his regulars; bit of a card, too, north country, different from these slow chaps round here; played a decent game of billiards into the bargain, though snooker was really his speciality. Monday? Of course he came in on Monday, always did, wouldn't miss once in three months. About half-past five as near as made no matter, that was his time for coming in, and played until seven. Positive? Certainly he was positive. 'Nour and a half Mr. Lumsdale always booked the table for; one and six; half-past five till seven within a minute or two. The fluffy-haired little creature in the bar had been the next link in the chain; she, too, knew Mr. Lumsdale by sight; he had acquired some degree of local notoriety by reason of the celebrated eccentricities of his master. Usually came in for something to eat on Monday nights after playing billiards (she said). On last Monday he certainly did, she remembered distinctly; funny sort of man, she thought, never had much to say for himself. . . . Time? About seven, coincident with the arrival of her own supper from the kitchen; he usually had bread and cheese and a pickled onion and perhaps a pint or two of beer, and he'd sit there, eating it slowly and not saying much, for half an hour perhaps. . . .

So far all this tallied exactly with Lumsdale's own story, and it seemed pretty clear that he had not left the Crown in Morechester until say a quarter to eight

on Monday evening. There was no bus at that time which would take him back, but, of course, it would be possible for him to beg a lift from somebody motoring along the main road.

Even if he walked back, according to his own statement, arriving say at nine, there was nothing inherently impossible in the supposition that he went in, murdered Arthur Burdett straight away, and then reported the matter to Sergeant White.

Against this theory was the doctor's very definite opinion that death had taken place some time before eight. Hylton realized that, although Doctor Chambers had been very certain about the matter, what he said was, after all, only an opinion, and he wondered . . .

He gently eased the long ash off his cigar and considered again the one small point in which the results of his inquiries had deviated from Lumsdale's own, and, apparently, straightforward statement.

Frederick Warner, the bus conductor, as clear-cut and sensible a young man as you could wish to meet, had not only noticed Lumsdale on his bus, but he also happened to notice where that worthy went to when he left the bus.

The Enderton bus stops in the Square (Warner explained) before going on up to the station, and its stopping place in the Square is directly outside the entrance to the post office. On Monday afternoon when Lumsdale left the bus he crossed over the pavement and went straight into the post office;

of this Warner was positively certain. He had naturally attached no importance to the circumstance, but he had happened to notice it, and was quite certain of it. . . .

Hylton himself hardly hoped that any importance belonged to the detail, but still it was the one trivial circumstance in which investigation differed from statement, and he thought it just worth while giving it a little further attention.

With this aim in view he cracked a few farewell pleasantries with the fluffy-haired barmaid, and catching the early afternoon bus (conducted by some less jovial confrère of Mr. F. Warner's) made his way back to Hope Enderton.

Lumsdale was in at the Court when he got there and bid him " good-day " with an independent nod of the head.

" Well, I've been ferreting around," the Inspector assured him, cheerfully.

Lumsdale did not look up from the boot he was cleaning, but he said, sardonically:

" I suppose they've never heard of me at the Crown, nor on the bus."

" You seem to be known by sight everywhere as a matter of fact."

" More people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows."

" Even the imposing gentleman outside the picture place knows you."

" He's clever then, for ah've never said a word to him in me life."

" He says as far as he can remember that you went into the pictures about half-past three on Monday."

Lumsdale looked up sharply from his task. " He can't remember very far then," he said. " What would I be doing messing about in Morechester till then? "

" To tell you the truth," Hylton said disarmingly, " that's just what I have been wondering."

Lumsdale shook his head and actually smiled slightly. " No, mister. I went straight from the bus t'pictures, and always do."

" You didn't do any shopping or anything on the way? "

" Ah went straight to pictures, mister, ah tell you," Lumsdale repeated doggedly.

" You're certain of that? "

" I ought to know."

" Just so. Ah well, the florid-faced gentleman outside the cinema must be wrong then."

Lumsdale's thin lips were pursed for some doubtless scathing comment when voices in the back passage interrupted him.

" Better go out and see who that is," Hylton suggested, " we don't want people poking about here."

" There's some as seem pretty handy at it," Lumsdale said as he left the room to investigate.

Quick as lightning the Inspector crossed the floor, and taking a photograph from the mantelshelf tucked it away in his pocket. It was a fairly recent likeness of friend Lumsdale, taken apparently on

the front of Margate or some such popular seaside place, though what had persuaded the grimly dour countryman to spend his pence on such frivolity Hylton could hardly guess.

He was glad to have that photograph; Andrew Lumsdale had probably as good a poker face as could be found in the world, but for all that Kingsley Hylton's sensitive intelligence had registered some hardly definable roughness, as it were, under the glib surface of the man's reiterated assurances about going straight from the bus to the picture-house. The feeling was so slight that the Inspector did not attach much weight to it, but even slighter beginnings than that, he well knew, had sent men to the gallows before that.

" It's Sergeant White as is poking about now," Lumsdale announced, returning with James White hard on his heels.

" I saw you come up the road to the Court, sir," White explained, " and I thought I'd look in to see if you wanted me for anything."

" Good man. We'll walk down to your place together. I've just been having a friendly chat with Lumsdale."

" That's reet." Lumsdale gave one of his rare, unmirthful laughs. " And now I'll tell you one thing as perhaps you don't know, just to show I *am* friendly like, whatever others may be. Come this way."

He led them both into the room where the murder had been committed. The body of Arthur Burdett,

the wiry, savage tenement of that wiry, savage spirit, had been taken to the Coroner's Court at Morechester in preparation for the inquest. It was a relief not to see that sheeted huddle on the table, and yet, in some queer way, the room seemed even grimmer and less pleasant for being empty. And what with this feeling, and the damp chill of the place, Hylton gave an involuntary little shiver.

Lumsdale noticed it and nodded. " Feels a bit like that," he said. " Ah reckon t'old boy's still hanging about the Court, near that safe of his, I wouldn't wonder."

" Don't trot out any more of that ghost business, for heaven's sake," Hylton said, sharply.

" You don't believe in it, eh, mister? Well, p'r'aps you're right; but here's a queer go. D'you notice anything? "

They were standing now by the table, and the Inspector looked carefully at the few trappings and adornments of that bare place.

" Someone's moved that club," he said.

" Ah did."

" Let me tell you, Lumsdale, that you had no right to touch it."

" That's as may be; but ah did touch it; ah put it back in its right place."

" In its right place? " Hylton queried quickly. One heavy wooden club, tragically smeared at its end, had been taken, with the body, to Morechester for the inquest; its fellow now hung from a nail high up on the wall between the windows.

" But surely it was on this nail before," Hylton said, pointing to an untenanted nail much lower down on the same wall.

" It was. That was where we found it when we came in, wasn't it, Sergeant? "

" That's right."

" How do you mean that that's its right place up there, then? "

" Why, mister, it *is* its right place, that's all. Those two clubs always did hang from that top nail. There used to be a plate on this bottom one, but it got broken a bit ago."

" How? "

" Well, if you must know, the old fool threw it at me."

Hylton was too much interested in the queer business of the clubs to enjoy this much.

" Were the two clubs on that top nail on Monday? " he asked.

" Ah'm certain they were."

" Why didn't you tell us about this before? "

" Ah never realized it till this morning. There's folks as wouldn't think it likely, mister, but in a rum sort of way ah reckon I was fond of the poor old man. When I came in that evening and saw him here it was a fair shock, I can tell you. I never gave a thought to that other club being on its wrong nail, but this morning when they came to take him away I suppose I was more normal like and all of a sudden I thought to meself, ' Why, dom it, Lumsdale, but that club's on wrong nail,

and I got a chair and put it up in its place."

Hylton stared at the man for a full moment without speaking; then still silently he tested the height of the present position of the club; in spite of his long arms he, too, had to mount a chair to reach it.

All he said then was, " If you've got any other bits of odd information tucked away you better give 'em to us, Lumsdale."

" Aye."

" Come on, Sergeant, we must be getting along." At the doorway the Inspector turned suddenly on Lumsdale and said casually, " Let's see, how much is it you get under Mr. Burdett's will—the whole lot? "

Lumsdale shook his head. " The lawyer'll tell me that, mister."

" But you know already, don't you? "

" Ah'll not say 'yes' to that, mister, and I don't see how you can prove whether I know or not."

Kingsley Hylton looked at the stubborn northcountryman for a moment and then abruptly turned away. He was beginning to take an acute dislike to Mr. Andrew Lumsdale; and over and above that he was beginning to realize what a formidable opponent that self-contained, self-sufficient individual might be.

When they had left the Court about a quarter of a mile behind Hylton stopped in the road to light one of his thin, black cigars. Then he said abruptly, " Do you realize, White, how extraordinary that business of the clubs is? "

"Well, it does seem a bit rum, sir."

"Rum? In a way it is one of the rummiest things I've ever come across. Just think for a minute: our hypothesis is that someone, almost certainly known to Burdett, comes to the door and is admitted. Either he was intending to do the murder, or something flares up between them on the spot. In any case there must have been some sort of preliminary quarrel. Now think, a quarrel: in the middle of it the stranger says, 'Excuse me one moment whilst I put this chair against the wall and get down something to hit you with'—it's hardly likely, is it?"

"P'r'aps Mr. Burdett went out of the room for a minute."

"And left someone behind with the safe open? Not likely. And anyway, supposing he did, why on earth did the man (if it was a man) get down two clubs to do a murder with?"

"We've only Lumsdale's word for where the clubs usually are, sir."

"No, we haven't. When I got up on the chair to see how high that nail is, I distinctly saw a slight discoloration of the paper—you know the unfaded bits behind pictures—and there's no doubt those two clubs have been hanging there for some time."

"Well, I can't say that I do understand it, sir."

"No more can I. In the middle of a quarrel I stand up on a chair to reach a weapon. That's odd enough, but it is just understandable.

"Having killed a man, I then go to the trouble of

standing on the chair again, getting down a second club which is no earthly use to me and deliberately hanging it in its wrong place. That doesn't make sense, White, to me."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE Inspector hired a motor-car from the Hoops and was back in Morechester by tea-time. He went straight to the post office, where he was delighted to find that all the assistants were girls. Many annoying weaknesses, Kingsley Hylton was well aware, could be legitimately charged to the sex which is misguidedly called the weaker; but in one respect they were supremely useful to a detective; almost unconsciously a woman takes notice of a face and remembers it.

In turn all five were brought into the postmaster's office and there confronted by the Inspector's most charming smile and a photograph. Stamps and Money Orders; Parcels; Telegrams and Express Letters, all failed to respond; and Hylton was beginning to lose faith in women, when Inquiries and Poste Restante revived it handsomely by reacting immediately to the photograph. She recognized the man at once. Mr. Langley.

"Mr. Who?"

"Langley. I think he must be a traveller or something and come through Morechester every four weeks or so; anyway he calls pretty regularly for letters at the Poste Restante."

"The devil he does? What sort of letters?"

"Well, they aren't letters really, they're more like little packages."

"Where from?"

Miss Inquiries rather over virtuously stated that she never bothered to look where things came from.

"And did Mr. Langley come in on Monday?"

"Monday? Let me think. Well, I know he's been in once this week because there was something for him in his box. It was either Monday or Tuesday, I'm not sure which."

"Thank you, Miss—er—Poste Restante."

"Pearson" (repressively).

"Miss Pearson" (apologetically).

The Inspector left the post office in a growing excitement of mind. He felt certain that Andrew Lumsdale had not forgotten his visit to the post office, but for some reason or other had not wanted it known.

He went back by car to Enderton, and getting out at the Hoops walked into the Square to buy some matches in John Fenton's Stores. The door was half open, so that his entry was unheralded by the tell-tale *ping* of the old-fashioned bell, and he had hardly entered the shop before he heard voices coming from the passage at the rear. This was the passage leading past the living-room to the private door giving on to the pavement. Mr. and Mrs. Fenton had company evidently. It naturally never entered Kingsley Hylton's head that there could be anything reprehensible about deliberately listening in to somebody else's conversation; a life of arduous detective work

had long since carried him past any such scrupulous niceties.

He heard general "good-byes" being said, and then, as an evident afterthought, a distinctly clerical voice said, "I was sorry not to see you at the women's service on Monday, Mrs. Fenton; I hope nothing was the matter."

"No, Rector, I just couldn't manage to get along for once, that was all."

The customary superfluous good-byes were repeated *ad nauseam* and the street door shut behind the visitor, then a somewhat perturbed man's voice said, "I don't understand about Monday evening, Mary; you told me you had been to church as usual."

"John, I——"

Ping.

Someone else had come in and shut the door sharply; Kingsley Hylton turned a reproachful eye on the innocent intruder, and Mary Fenton, a well-made woman, now past middle age and growing a little on the matronly side of buxomness, came out of the back regions.

"Yes, sir?"

Hylton bought his box of matches and went out reflectively, his mind reverting automatically to the business of the secretive Mr. Lumsdale.

Outside he almost ran into the Rev. Steeble, who unexpectedly stopped him and said, in a voice that the Inspector recognized:

"You are Mr. Hylton, I believe?"

"That's right."

"My name is Steeble. I am the Vicar of this parish."

"How d'you do, Mr. Steeble?"

"Mr. Hylton, a deed of violence has been committed, apparently a crime, and it is your duty to inquire into it. I hope no man understands the meaning of duty better than I do, but somehow, Mr. Hylton, I hardly think you will be successful in your inquiries."

Kingsley Hylton was a little taken back by this greeting; he looked at the thin, æsthetic face and the blue, smouldering eyes speculatively.

"You don't, Mr. Steeble?" he asked. "Why?"

The Rev. Steeble's pale blue eyes blazed up into a fanatical fury and his whole, fine face became alight with a sort of holy anger; his voice was strained as he answered:

"Because of a fact which Scotland Yard for all its cleverness is apt to forget, Mr. Hylton—*because God will guard His own.*" His wild eyes stared straight into the astonished ones of the Inspector for a full half minute and then, suddenly sinking his head on to his chest, he turned and walked rapidly away.

Kingsley Hylton went slowly back to the Hoops. "What you've got to remember, K.H.," he admonished himself under his breath, "is that logic doesn't count with human beings—they're all mad, including yourself." This philosophical generalization, for all its truth, was but poor comfort to the Inspector, whose neat and orderly mind had a positive horror of loose ends in a case; and so far, he was

bound to admit, the Hope Enderton affair seemed to be all loose ends and no case.

Dale Shipley was in the saloon of the Hoops drinking a moody pint of beer; but the young man was less dejected than he might well have been. Lawson's visit to Fielden Cottage turned out to be innocuous; the lodgekeeper had come merely to tell Dale (who, as he knew, was on the look out for a horse) that there was a likely looking mare for sale over at Ruckley, and thoughts of horse and hound were running through the young man's head now.

He nodded to Hylton and regarded him with an eye that lost nothing of its furtive wariness when the Inspector strolled up to the bar to join him in a drink.

"Making any headway?" he asked casually.

"Lots," Hylton cheerfully assured him.

The young man seemed relieved. "That's good hearing," he said; "after anyone in particular?"

"We're always after somebody, you know," the Inspector answered.

"Um. I suppose you'll be too busy to come out for a day's hunting to-morrow—they're meeting at the Five Way Post just up the road, and Perry, here, would find you a hack."

Kingsley Hylton considered this semi-invitation. True there were many things he wanted to do; but true, also, that he had a great theory about observing people in their unguarded moments.

"I might have a day out," he said. "I'll think it over."

CHAPTER NINE

"I DON'T understand about Monday evening, Mary; you told me you had been to church as usual."

"John—I——"

Ping. . . .

Had Mary Fenton been of a sporting turn of mind the phrase "saved by the gong" must inevitably have occurred to her at that moment, but Mary Fenton was not smart or modern or sporting or up-to-date; she was fifty-six and old-fashioned and slow, and had nothing to her credit save the untarnished honour and hard work and drudgery of a lifetime spent in loving one man.

John Fenton stared after her as she automatically obeyed the summons of the shop door bell and went to see what was wanted. Even if their world was tumbling about their ears it would not have entered John or Mary Fenton's head to let that bell ring unheeded; it, and what it stood for, had become the major part of their lives. And indeed (John thought bitterly) their world was like enough to fall about their ears before long; and, as though that were not enough, here was this other thing . . . that Mary should say she was going to church; dress up in her decent black, and actually take her book; that she should come back and tell him calmly that the service had been

" much as usual "; and that she should never have been at all! All this was ominously like the first sounds of a cracking world to John Fenton; he stared at the door in dismay and bewilderment. . . .

John Fenton was born in 1875 in the remote and insignificant hamlet of Little Enderton. His father, who was horseman at High Farm at the wage of eighteen shillings a week, lived in the middle one of three poor cottages traditionally known as Shepherd's Row. Here John's mother rose at 5.30 each morning; baked her own bread; cured her own ham; did every vestige of her own washing; made all the clothes for herself and her family; found time to go up to the farm on two afternoons a week to help in the dairy; and brought up three children to fear God and revere the Queen. And at night time, by the light of a farthing rush dip, she read the Bible. In short she was one of the ignorant, incapable Victorian females upon whom the modern woman is so striking an improvement. John was the youngest child, having an elder brother and a sister. At the age of nine he started to earn money (a shilling a week) rook scaring in the High Farm ploughlands; but his father intended him for better things than farm labouring, and when he was twelve he was apprenticed to the Little Enderton blacksmith at the considerable wage of eighteen pence a week. The work was hard and long, but young John was never too tired when he got back home and had finished his supper of bread and dripping to sit up and listen to his mother

reading the thrilling and romantic stories of the Old Testament.

This went on for four years until, when many boys of his age in England were just beginning to enjoy the best years of public school life, John Fenton had to shoulder graver responsibilities. Within twelve months disaster overtook the little household in Shepherd's Row. John's brother (older than he was by several years) emigrated to Australia, where the glint of freshly found gold was attracting a mad stampede of all kinds of men from all over the world. "I'll come back with a fortune," he said in his optimistic way, but his mother shook her head; a regular wage-earner at home was worth a good deal more, to her way of thinking, than a mythical fortune in a far-off country whose very existence she could hardly believe in. Three months after the elder boy left, the blow fell. Fenton was carting manure to the Far Tussocks and, whether due to some carelessness of his own or the impatience of a fresh horse will never be known, was crushed between the heavy cart and a gate post. Ever after in his life, if he shut his eyes, John Fenton could vividly call up the scene when towards the grey end of a sombre winter's day, with the bare trees whipped by a bitter wind, heavy footsteps and unwonted voices brought his mother apprehensively to the door of the cottage, and a grim little procession, bearing what was left of Albert Fenton on a stretcher improvised out of wattle hurdles, came up the path.

Albert Fenton had earned eighteen shillings a week, he had brought up a family, paid his way and saved forty-eight pounds.

Such an achievement is not sung by poets, nor remembered in epitaphs, but it deserves to be, it borders on the heroic.

Mrs. Fenton was left with forty-eight pounds and a pension of six shillings a week to face life. John's wages were then five shillings a week, of which he paid three to his mother; his sister was just beginning as scullery maid at a house at Nyeton and John and his mother lived together alone in Shepherd's Row.

In those days Little Enderton was even less sophisticated than it is now and there was no shop of any description there; any buying had to be done in Hope Enderton (a metropolis by comparison) on Thursdays, the one day in the week when the carrier's cart went from one place to the other.

The Little Enderton smith was an unusually capable one and there was never enough work at his own smithy to keep him busy all the week; on Tuesdays and Thursdays therefore he used to make regular rounds in his pony and trap to tout for work at the big farms in the neighbourhood. On these excursions he was accompanied by John, who was now a fully competent striker and assistant. These journeys constantly took him through Hope Enderton which, with its shops and its Square, its inns and general bustle of life, seemed the very hub of the Universe.

How does a woman with a total income of nine shillings a week, with rent to pay and a household to maintain, contrive to give Christmas parties to children? The answer is that it can't be done and yet that it is. Mrs. Fenton did it. Half a dozen children of neighbours even worse off than herself were asked in for a Christmas party, and John was commissioned to buy a bottle of sweets on his next journey through Hope Enderton.

When the party was finished the sweets were not; male-wise, John had mismanaged the shopping and had bought far too large a bottle—almost half of its savoury stickiness remained when the children had gone. " Take it back and perhaps they'll allow you on it," was his mother's advice; advice which John all but took, but by some kindness of Providence the germ of the Great Idea was born in him instead. The half bottle of sweets was kept, doled out into paper bags, and these were put in the front-room window beneath a crude pencil notice, " Sweets ½d a Bag."

Mrs. Fenton laughed at it. But the results were astonishing; within three days the stock was sold out and, all but a penny, John jingled in his hands the amount he had paid for the whole bottle.

" That's the end of that," his mother said, but John knew differently. He sat up for a long time counting his pennies and thinking. Extraordinary schemes, so ambitious that he dare not reveal them to anyone, were unfolding in his brain. He was a man visited by a vision, and his vision told him

that so far from being the end of things it was only the beginning.

"We're going to keep a shop, mother," he announced next day, and before the end of the week the window of the Fentons' front room blossomed out into the first shop in Little Enderton.

It appeared that Little Enderton wanted a shop; that practically every housewife in the place grudged the time and money spent on the carrier's journey to Hope Enderton once a week. The "Sweets ½d a Bag" stage vanished almost at once; tea, sugar, flour, candles and rice soon appeared in the window. In six months time John left the blacksmith for good (much to that excellent fellow's dismay) and devoted a whole morning to painting an imposing wooden sign:

"THE STORES. JOHN FENTON."

The venture thrived amazingly, and John used to sit at night counting the day's tale of pennies and dreaming. Mrs. Fenton read the Bible. She had faith in her clever son, but she could never feel quite sure that such a revolutionary break from the mode of life she had been used to was right.

Little Enderton wanted a shop; it liked its shop; it was proud of its shop. But being human it spent no more than it strictly had to; and Little Enderton was small, its possibilities were soon exhausted. John's ambitions, whetted by the first taste of success, were boundless; he lay awake at night scheming and chafing at the limitations which mere geography im-

posed upon him. Limitations which were to some extent offset by his purchase of a safety bicycle, the first of the new machines to be seen in that part of Sussex, and further, and most tangible evidence, of his go aheadness.

The bicycle may have doubled his labours, but it more than doubled his turnover. Housewives in Nyeton, Ruckley, Punt and all the scattered houses in between found that instead of having to go to the shop, the shop now came to them, and they bought accordingly. Not only did they buy, they asked for things which John hadn't got; his reply was invariable: "I can get it for you, missus," and got it he had the next time he was round. But all his journeys brought him back to the front room in Shepherd's Row; the room which was not even fitted up as a shop, which was crowded if three people were in it, which was hopelessly inadequate for his present material needs, and much more than hopelessly inadequate for his insatiable dreams.

John Fenton had not dared to tell even his mother of such an ambition, but he dreamed of the day when his sign would swing in no less a place than the Square at Hope Enderton. . . .

One day, when he was in his twenty-fourth year, he knocked at the kitchen door of a house just outside Ruckley.

The door was opened by a fine strong girl, her dimpled face flushed from the exertion of scrubbing the scullery floor, her sleeves rolled up showing the chubby forearms bare to the elbow.

She smiled at John inquiringly and asked him what he wanted. And John Fenton, the rising young business man of twenty-three, the architect of his own fortunes, the spurner of limitations, the dreamer of ambitious dreams, dithered and boggled on the doorstep. He was in love.

Mary Chapman was then almost nineteen; country-born, country-bred, country-minded. She spoke in a musical, laughing voice which she never lost all her life. John Fenton thought it the most lovely voice he had ever heard, and he made it repeat some prosaic inquiry about potatoes for the sheer joy of listening to it. He was back at the house outside Ruckley again the next day and the next, and on the day after that he and Mary walked together in the evening.

For four years, in the old-fashioned village phrase, they kept company; until, when he was twenty-seven, John's mother, who worked hard up to the last day of her life, died in the cottage in Shepherd's Row and the last tie that bound him to Little Enderton was gone.

He and Mary were married at Eastertide of the next year; it had been a long, hard winter, but the sun was gathering strength and the spring flowers showing when they walked out of St. Leonard's Church as man and wife.

John was now in a positive ferment to bring his business to Hope Enderton, and, as though Providence was on their side, within a month of being married he heard that Sanders, the out-of-date,

bibulous old cobbler in the Square, was giving up and that his shop would be to let.

Mary was staggered when John broached his plan to her, the first time he had shared his ambition with anyone.

"The Square!" she said, almost awestricken. "John!"

"We can do it, my dear, if we stick together."

She looked at him in pride and loyalty; her John, her clever, ambitious man, her husband.

That evening John put on his best and walked up to the Court to see "Young" Mr. Burdett as he was then called. Arthur Burdett had then not long succeeded his father as the Squire of Enderton. He was already known as a bit of a queer one, but he neither loved his pocket nor hated his fellow men in the same inhuman way that was to come.

John half expected that he might be asked to have a glass of beer, but he was not; he was driven to a hard bargain, and to what was, unconfessedly, the very limit of what he could afford in the way of rent; but he left the Court the tenant of No. 3 The Square.

Moving from Little Enderton was a great business; the carrier's cart was the best part of a whole day at it, and for the first week or two John and Mary went to bed after twelve each night dog tired. John brought his sign with him, he had an affection for it, the same sign that had cost him half a day's labour to paint—" The Stores. John Fenton "—and, crude though it was, it went proudly up over the new premises.

It seemed—what John had hardly dared to hope—that Hope Enderton itself, that busy metropolis, was as pleased as Little Enderton had been to have a go-ahead, up-to-date general stores in the Square. The world was moving quickly towards more spacious days, and repercussions and echoes of that progress in time reached even the hamlets of silly Sussex. Farm labourers were now earning twenty-five shillings a week, many of their sons worked at the recently opened Enderton brickyard and made twice as much as their fathers; one of the much ridiculed and patently impractical new motor-cars had actually been seen in the village. All this change meant more trade, and the Stores flourished. "The business," as John and Mary always spoke of it to one another, ate up most of their lives. John was always up at six sharp; he first lit the fire in the kitchen and set a kettle to boil for Mary's cup of tea. Then he meticulously swept out the shop with a sort of religious thoroughness; started the oil stove if it were cold weather, and generally put things in order. Then he took a cup of tea up to Mary and never lost any of the exquisite delight of seeing his wife in bed, her rich black hair dishevelled, her cheerful face all smiles, maybe the bedclothes carelessly thrown to one side and the ripe, red nipple of one breast showing.

They had breakfast before eight and were finished with the meal before the little daily maid came in at half-past. Then the bicycle boy (John was an employer of labour now) made a laggardly appear-

ance, usually with some grumble about his machine; the shop was open, and with the first *ping* of the door bell the day had truly begun.

That door bell became, in a sense, the most important thing in the Fentons' lives; its "ping" assumed imperial qualities, it had to be listened for whatever domestic duties might summon them both temporarily to other parts of the house. It was the very symbol and essence of "the business."

Not that the making of a reasonably comfortable living (though he found that pleasant enough) was the main thing in John Fenton's life. What he enjoyed was the adventure of it; what he doubly enjoyed was the double adventure of doing it with Mary. Now he kept none of his plans or ambitions to himself, all were shared with Mary, sometimes as they sat over the tiny fire in the back living-room, sometimes as they lay in the dark in one another's arms; and listening to Mary's whispers in that rich and lovely voice John would think "how silver sweet sound lovers' tongues by night."

Two years after their establishment in the Square John Fenton rose one day and went about the business of Mary's morning cup of tea with unusual gravity. Mary was lying an extra half-hour in bed that morning; soon she would be taking an extra hour; a blessed and beatific indolence, for there was moving in her, as yet only feebly valiant, the life of a child, the life of what she earnestly begged God would be a young John, with her John's quietness, his courtesy, his lovable simplicity.

When her confinement was imminent John did an unprecedented thing, he actually unscrewed the all-important bell from the door, and for a week its imperious "ping" was heard no more.

The child, a girl, was born towards three o'clock of a frosty morning in February. Doctor Chambers brought it into the world, a world which apparently was not to its small liking, for it died in convulsions ten hours later.

John had its pathetically tiny body boxed in a coffin, and he balanced this on his knees and drove in a cab hired from the Hoops to the cemetery, where the greedy earth soon swallowed up so small a morsel.

It was a melancholy journey and a melancholy homecoming to Mary. The first spring flowers were out, primroses and snowdrops showing in the dark banks, but there was no spring in Mary Fenton's heart. Her whole life had gradually transferred itself to the living thing within her, and its death was like the death of her own heart.

She never bore any more children. God who had put so strong an instinct for motherhood in her spirit, had matched it with some weakness in her body, and Doctor Chambers told John that if she were to have another baby it would in all probability kill her.

The bell was put back over the door again and the normal life of the Stores was renewed.

For two years Mary thought that she could never do anything more than pretend that life was the same; she went through each day listlessly and cried herself to sleep each night. But John never wavered

in his kindliness and in his simple constancy; she leaned on him even when she did not know she was doing it, drew strength from him even when, in angry, unreasoning tears, she railed at him.

In the end they were drawn more together than ever before; the roses came back to Mary's cheeks and laughter to Fenton's Stores.

Now the business filled their lives almost entirely; they both became part and parcel of the Stores, and John would no more have thought of taking any step, however small, without consulting his wife, than he would of shutting the Stores up for a day and going off to Lewes races.

Every Sunday they went arm in arm to church together (but nothing would induce Mary to go near the pathetically small grassy mound that lay on the south side of the churchyard); every Monday night at half-past seven Mary went out to the women's service, and on every alternate Thursday afternoon to the Women's Institute. They had a small circle of friends; they had the Stores; they had themselves, and were happy.

Then one day, *ping*, a stranger came into the shop. A bowler-hatted, quick-eyed, smart sort of person with sharp, incisive words. Mary was washing in the kitchen and John went to see what was wanted.

"Morning," said the stranger. "You Mr. Fenton? Good. I won't beat about the bush, Mr. Fenton, don't believe in it. I'm from the Coastal Co-operative Society; well, you can say I *am* the Coastal Co-operative Society. We're in a big way and we're growing

every day. We want to get into some of these small inland places. You've done pretty well here, I guess, and maybe you'd like to retire. We'll buy you out."

" What, buy Fenton's Stores *out*? " John asked slowly after an incredulous pause.

" Lock, stock and barrel. And give you a good price, too. What about it? "

John shook his head, and his voice trembled a little with indignation. " I—I wouldn't sell the Stores for a million pounds," he said.

The other man laughed and his voice lost something of its superficial pleasantness.

" Well, you won't get a million, I'll tell you *that*," he said. " But I'm willing to make a good offer any time you change your mind. Think it over, Mr. Fenton. Good morning."

When his unwelcome visitor had gone John Fenton turned to find Mary standing in the doorway leading from the back passage, brought there by some instinct that something unusual and even threatening was afoot.

They talked over the ridiculous suggestion on that and many subsequent evenings; in time they persuaded themselves to laugh at it and to treat it as something so outrageously impossible as to belong to the realms of the fantastic. But in a year's time a huge, four-storied concrete building was put up in the main street of Morechester which, with its flamboyant electric sign " Coastal Co-operative Society Limited " was altogether too solid and alarming to be treated as fantastic. John heard

of two Morechester traders in a small way who had been forced out of business by the Stores, who could buy more cheaply and sell more cheaply than their pig-headed, old-fashioned competitors. He said nothing to Mary about it, and did not know that she, too, had heard the news and was deliberately refraining from saying anything to him. Each at heart was deadly afraid and each was playing a game of make-believe.

Three more visits the quick-eyed, sharp-spoken stranger paid to them, always with the same result. John Fenton was a true Englishman, fear made him more obstinate, and he grew to hate the greedy, possessive way the man's eyes darted round his beloved Stores.

At his fourth visit the man changed his tone. " Now look here, Fenton," he said, " a bargain's better than a fight any day. We're willing to fight, mind you, if you make us, and there's no doubt who'll win. It's the day of the big multiple shops, a blind man can see that; you and your one errand-boy affairs are played out. You may as well know that we are after the lease of Nos. 5 and 7 the Square. We may have to pay for it, but we can get it. We're still willing to buy you out, stock, goodwill and everything at a decent figure. What about it? "

" No."

The two men looked steadily at one another and at length the visitor nodded. " You're obstinate," he said, " but I don't think it will pay you." He

went towards the door and on his way stopped and picked up the price card from a pile of tea packets. " Best Tea 1s. 8d. a Pound," he read aloud with a laugh. " We'll be selling the very same tea at 1s. 4d. next door to you in a year's time."

John went straight back to Mary and told her of the ultimatum.

" Nos. 5 and 7—but those are the next two numbers," she said, aghast.

John nodded.

" They belong to Mr. Burdett, John."

" Most of the Square does for that matter."

" He'd never allow it, surely."

That evening John paid his second visit to Enderton Court. More than thirty years had made a big difference in the man he went to visit. Half an hour's talk got them little forrader.

" Mr. Burdett, it will mean the end of the Stores if they come there, they can undersell me till I'm forced to close down."

" Fair competition."

" But Mr. Burdett, I've been your tenant for over thirty years."

" At a precious low rent."

" No, sir, at a very high rent. You asked me a big figure to start with and I've never been a day behind with it."

"I'd have had a distraint warrant out if ye were," Arthur Burdett cackled with malicious glee.

" But Mr. Burdett, I ask you as an Enderton

man. Surely there's something due to local energy and enterprise."

" I don't know about that, Fenton, all I know about is the rent due to me."

" I've never owed you one penny."

" So you've said. I tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a chance, then you can't go round with the rest saying I'm a hard man."

" I'm not going to do that in any case, Mr. Burdett."

" You'll be an exception, then. I'll give you a chance. The Coastal Co-operative people are willing to pay me a certain rent for the two houses. You can rent 'em instead, if you'll pay me the same figure."

" What is it, Mr. Burdett? "

" Four hundred a year, payable quarterly, in advance."

John gasped. " I couldn't possibly manage that, sir," he faltered. " Why, it would take all my profits away at once, what with the extra rates and lighting and everything. Where should I get the money from to pay a rent like that, Mr. Burdett, on top of my own already? "

Arthur Burdett began to lose his temper. " Don't ask me where you'd get the money from, Fenton," he snarled. " Where d'you think I get the money from that everybody's always trying to take off me, eh? "

" But Mr. Burdett, all I'm asking is that you don't let the premises to a competitor——"

" I'll let it to whoever pays the money."

All this was on a Friday evening. John returned to the Stores and repeated the substance of the interview almost word for word to Mary. Where he was inclined to be submissive and philosophical she was angry and pugnacious. They were both too upset to eat any supper, and they spent a miserable evening and a still more miserable, sleepless night.

On Saturday morning Mary spied a small, green Austin Seven car, with the dreaded words Coastal Co-op. Soc. in gold lettering on it, draw up outside No. 5. Two men, one of them carrying a measuring tape and rule, got out of it.

It was evident now that things were urgent, and all through Saturday and Sunday Mary had urged John to go up to the Court once more and put their case before Mr. Burdett.

" It's inhuman; he can't do it," she kept saying. " He can't do it."

But John seemed to have fallen into an almost apathetic frame of mind, and sat for more than an hour on Saturday evening gazing vacantly at the Co-operative Society's half-page advertisement in the Morechester paper.

On Monday morning Mr. Steeble had called, and they told him something of their troubles and anxieties. Peter Steeble had no love for the old miser, and worse than miser, at Enderton Court. He listened with his thin, æsthetic lips curled in angry disgust. When he left, the Fentons saw him off at

the door of the shop, and, standing there, Mary caught sight of Arthur Burdett padding by on the opposite side of the Square. The sight of that green-coated, hunched-up figure affected Mary strongly, so much so as to send a sort of suffusion of blood to her head so that for a moment she could hardly speak. Then she clutched John's arm and said, "There's old Mr. Burdett over there. Couldn't you go and speak to him about it *now*, John?"

But John didn't go, and wouldn't go, and for a moment Mary was almost as angry with him as she was with the skinflint miser. She was still active, healthy, virile; it was not in her to accept defeat so easily. She said no more. At half-past seven she appeared as usual in her Sunday black and carrying her prayer-book. It was so customary, so much as though their life might still go on the same, that it brought a catch to John's throat.

"Off to women's service, my dear?" he asked as he always did.

"Yes, John," she said quietly.

"Wrap up well, my dear."

"Yes, John."

He had heard the door close quietly behind her.

All this now came back into John Fenton's mind as he stared at his wife in bewilderment. It was impossible to believe that she had not really been to the women's service, that she had deliberately deceived him.

John Fenton was terrified; everything else was

swept out of his mind; the very foundations of his life seemed to be breaking up under him.

"I don't understand about Monday evening, Mary," he said slowly; "you told me you had been to church as usual."

Mary hesitated and looked at him, and he was frightened by something in her eyes.

She tried to tell him something, but could only cry, "John—I—I——" then rushing across the room she fell on her knees at his side, and with her lovely head on his lap burst into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing.

CHAPTER TEN

JUST as the first light of dawn was beginning to move greyly over the cold, bare fields a compact, reddish-brown form trotted silently up the side of Seven Acre Spinney and, jumping more neatly than any cat on to the stump of the old elm blown down in the great gale, dropped into the undergrowth and padded noiselessly along the ride to her earth. This was the Seven Acre vixen, quite a celebrated personage in her way, having achieved the distinction of print on three separate occasions. She had given the Morechester Hunt three of the best runs in the whole of its long history, and when the port went round and hunting stories began, she was apt to be invested with almost legendary size and performance. Actually she was not unduly big, but nowhere in the wide world, probably, did a mere sixteen pounds of flesh and bone contain more compact vitality, cleverness and courage.

She was sleepy; the long, cold hours of the night when all the world lay still and silver under the moon had been full ones for her. She had been eight miles across country to the far side of Hangman's Holt; there she had run with a great dog fox who had taken delight in her company; they had killed

together, raiding the henroost of some fool man who had thought to make it impregnable with ridiculous bits of wire. Even now in retrospect the vixen could hear again the terrified squawking, taste once more the warm, satisfying blood. They had eaten their fill and more than their fill, and the vixen had trotted heavily back to her home in Seven Acre Spinney, reaching it with the dawn.

Though the sharpest human ears could have detected no trace of it, her entry into the spinney and her progress down the ride caused a momentary apprehension. The dawn hour was one full of life in the spinney; the wild things that hunted by night were returning, such as lived by day were beginning to stir; in fifty holes and hiding-places, in miniature runs and stalking tracks, round the bole of every tree and in its branches there was infinitesimal sound and movement, every sound and movement packed with fear and hatred, greed and death.

All this was stilled for a second as the vixen trotted quietly to her earth. As well as if she had told them, the other wild things knew at once that she had killed and eaten and was heavy with food, but even so the tribute of a moment's wary and watchful silence was paid as she slunk by.

The vixen went to her earth, sniffed suspiciously several times to make sure that no danger had been there whilst she was away, then turning in half a dozen restless circles, she settled down comfortably to sleep.

In five hours' time she was to be glad of that sleep;

but now she took her rest easily, dreaming of the dog fox by Hangman's Holt and the stupid, squawking, satisfying chickens.

. . . . . .

Nancy Featherstone gentled her big grey, which had a shrewd idea of what was afoot and was excited with anticipation of it, and turned him left-handed down the tarmac road as she came out of her drive gateway.

Her groom, standing arms akimbo in the stable-yard watching her departure, was mildly surprised. "Rum way o' going to the Five Way Post," he muttered; but he was a philosophical man, as grooms mostly are; in his experience women and horses were almost equally unpredictable, and likewise almost equally desirable; whistling a sharp, untuneful melody, he went back to his harness-room with its sweet smell of leather, its small, intensely hot fire, and its last night's racing news and forecasts.

Nancy took the grey up Pilcher's Lane, at the top of which she saw what she had hoped to see, a solitary horseman riding ahead of her. She put the grey on to the wide grass verge of the lane and went along it at a canter.

"Hallo, Dale," she cried, reining in alongside him.

Young Shipley turned to her in high good humour; he was immensely pleased with his new mount, and as far as he could see all Banner Dawley's glowing prognostications might well be justified.

"Hallo, Nancy. How d'you like the look of her?"

With the morning sun gleaming on her chestnut coat and white stockings, the mare looked a picture; and young Dale Shipley, always at his best on horseback, took the eye, too, in his rakish way.

" She looks splendid, Dale."

" She feels all right; keen as mustard, I should say, though I haven't galloped her yet. I suppose we'll draw Seven Acre first, won't we? "

" Pretty sure to."

" I wonder if that old fox we've had out before'll be there."

Nancy laughed. " I'm beginning to believe the Seven Acre vixen is a myth," she said; " we never catch her, anyway."

They jogged along in silence for a bit, each taking stock of the other's mount; then Dale reined in closer to Nancy and said a little awkwardly:

" I say, Nancy——"

" Yes? "

" You know what I told you about having a bit of a tiff with old Burdett? "

" Yes."

" You haven't said anything to anyone about it, have you? "

" Of course not."

Dale looked relieved. " That's all right," he said with a laugh. " It doesn't really matter, of course, only I—I wouldn't like people to think that the last thing I did with the old fool was to have a slanging match with him, and you know how people talk. That detective fellow would soon get hold of a thing

like that—he's coming out to-day. I put him up to hiring that old screw of Perry's; with any luck he'll break his blasted neck."

They had turned the corner of the lane now, and a quarter of a mile away down the straight Roman road could be seen the preliminary muster of the meet where the five ways met. Other riders were nearing them, and on an impulse Nancy leaned across and said, "Dale, would you tell me one thing——"

Shipley looked up quickly at her.

"What is it?"

"Lawson didn't bring you any—any bad news the other day at the Cottage, did he?"

As on many other occasions in his life, Dale told a lie and the truth in one breath.

"Bad news?" he asked. "Why should he? He only came to see if I was suited with a horse."

Nancy steered the grey past a group of village children with a perambulator of which he was pretending to be inordinately afraid. She knew her Dale better, possibly, than he knew himself, and somehow she was not altogether happy.

"'Morning, Dale. 'Morning, Miss Featherstone."

Captain Reeves and his wife came trotting by, looking smart as ever on their big horses full of bone which always carried them well up in the hunt; and from a side turning a figure in somewhat nondescript kit joined the group on the notorious old hack from the Hoops.

Kingsley Hylton—despite the social drawback of

his ill-assorted hunting clothes, largely borrowed from his landlord—was feeling happy. He enjoyed a day's hunting, and it was long enough since he had had one. True, his mount was long past the first fine flush of its youth, but Hylton felt instinctively towards the old horse that bond of sympathetic fellowship which is the *sine qua non* of an enjoyable ride. He reined back to the outer fringe of the animated little crowd at the Five Ways Post and studied the scene attentively. Mrs. Reeves looked splendid on her big dark bay; he noticed particularly how smart and trim her hair was looking; beside her Nancy Featherstone was on the dowdy side of workmanlike; Reeves, who managed not to see the Inspector, looked the thruster that he was, and nobody would have mistaken Dale Shipley for anything but a horseman.

Hylton ran his eye over that quartet of diverse people a score of times. They had all been under one roof, as he knew, when the murder had been announced; and one of them, he was convinced, maybe more than one, knew more about the matter than had been admitted. A long night's reflection had not made the Inspector any more pleased with the way the case was going. True, Lumsdale still had a good deal to explain; true, too, that friend Lumsdale was already, on the Inspector's orders, subject to a fairly close though unobtrusive supervision; but Hylton had a feeling that he was skimming on the surface of deeper waters than he knew of; and he would not be satisfied until a good deal

which he was certain was at present being hidden from him came to light.

Doctor Chambers came tiptutting up on a great, ungainly brute that had landed him at various times in practically every ditch in West Sussex; he seemed to know everyone and to be popular with them all. It was not a big field, and there was only a sprinkling of pink coats, outnumbered by the people in rat-catcher, and the usual healthy assortment of sporting farmers in clothes as diverse as their mounts. Two children were there, ecstatically happy on shaggy ponies as round as barrels, and a cadaverous individual on a horse whose bony humps and hollows made the Inspector's animal look like a National winner. Forming a rough circle round the riders, and scanning them all with a mercilessly critical eye, stood the village folk, including the notorious Old Jack, resplendent in a pink coat discarded by a huntsman as past further service a good ten years ago. Old Jack knew everybody, spoke to nobody. His sharp eyes, set in a face incredibly weather-beaten, darted incessantly round the circle of people. He had been up at five that morning; knew, or professed to know, all about every fox within fifteen miles; had stopped a couple of earths before breakfast; would run with the hounds all day; open gates; retrieve runaways; assist at accidents and contrive somehow to magic a couple of spades from nowhere if they should be wanted for digging out. This curious day's labour would earn him five or six shillings at the least,

which would all be spent that evening at the inn nearest the point of cessation of the day's hunt. From which inn Old Jack would be forcibly expelled dead drunk at ten o'clock, to spend the night, freezing or not, under a convenient haystack and to repeat the whole performance again the next hunting day. Old Jack's own estimate of his age was sixty-eight, but it was probable that he was really over seventy, and Doctor Chambers never saw him without marvelling at a constitution which could be so cruelly abused and yet remain, apparently, unimpaired.

" *Hounds, gennelmen, please.*"

The pack of bitches, eighteen and a half couple, came pad-padding along, their waving sterns like a feathery forest above them. Hard-conditioned hounds these, willing to face briar and bramble and the most punishing of going, sobeit they could do the one thing their nature craved for—*kill.*

Inspector Hylton eyed them reflectively, and it crossed his mind that there was a good deal of human life reproduced in miniature in a hunt. The wind freshened a little and men turned to one another and prophesied, divergently, ignorantly and unscientifically, of that most mysterious of all nature's mysterious things—scent.

It was this little puff of freshening wind that carried the first signals of danger to the sleeping vixen in Seven Acre Spinney. She slept, and slept deeply, but, as with all wild things, one of her acute senses remained on almost undiminished guard, and her soft muzzle had hardly done twitching at the

danger-laden wind before her eyes opened and she was wide awake.

Man!

The air came to her full of mingled scents; more quickly than any expert sorter with a pile of letters, that delicate nose distinguished, separated, classified. And the least pungent was the most dreaded; the rank, bad, tainted smell of man; man the prime killer and arch enemy of all wild things. Mingled with the man scent came the smell of dogs and horses, and the vixen knew what was on foot.

Unhurriedly she rose from her resting-place and shook herself like a dog; then she stretched each of her four legs and her whole lithe, lovely brown body, tasting, as it were, the last delicious moments of sleep. Then she yawned and lifted her nuzzle again to windward to examine the increasingly tainted air.

She had slept for five hours and was fully refreshed. Her night's kill was digested; she was neither hungry nor full. She trotted out on to the ride and lifted a cautious muzzle up wind and down. The air was full of danger which seemed to be coming nearer, but it was still a good way off. She staled against an ash twig on the ground; and drank a little, but no more than a little, from a spring that bubbled up out of the bank by it. Then she slid silently through the undergrowth to the edge of the wood imperially oblivious of all the excited chattering wild life about her, and waited.

She was five years old and without fault or blemish,

in her beautiful prime. Swifter than any other wild English animal, cleverer than most, afraid of none. She stood on the edge of the spinney and gazed over the valley with those soft and preternaturally bright eyes. Now she could actually see her arch-enemy approaching, her arch-enemy Man and the army which he was forced to bring into play to have any hope of catching her—thirty-seven hounds; two terriers; twenty-seven horses; two paid servants; pink coats; horns; second horsemen and all the panoply and display of war.

The small animal against whom all this display was directed withdrew into a thicker part of the spinney and began to move uneasily to and fro in a half-circle, as though in some invisible cage. Danger, and deadly danger, was imminent; but she was not afraid; she was thinking.

Hounds were thrown into the spinney on the far side, away from her, and their rampageous, noisy entry caused a sudden and complete cessation of all the usual morning noises of the place. Every living thing in it froze into watchful immobility whilst the happy, clumsy harbingers of death crashed through the undergrowth, jumped fallen boles, nosed this way and that, whimpering with excitement.

The vixen knew, then, that she must leave; she came out of the spinney so unobtrusively that only the trained pair of eyes stationed there for that very purpose could have detected her; she paused and waited cunningly for a warning shout; none came; the particular arch-enemy watching her was almost

as clever at the game as she was; still she was not satisfied, and hugging the side of the wood, she slunk along it for more than a hundred yards till she gained the headland of a ploughed field, then she turned sharply down one of the furrows, and casting all pretence away, went like a brown streak down wind. She was half-way across the plough before any sound was raised behind her, then long and thin and piercing came the drawn-out cry of the whip, that indescribable ululation of joy and bloodlust and excitement which means that a fox has gone away; it was drowned by the sudden full-throated music of the bitches and the shrillness of the huntsman's horn. The vixen put back her ears and increased her pace. Down the plough she went, straight through the shallow pond at the bottom and up the grassy slope the other side; there were sheep at the top of the hill and she made straight for them, scattering them in a hubbub of stupid alarm, and glad of their bitter, scent-smothering smell.

Down the far slope she went, running fast but still well within herself, and into the tiny brook; she could have cleared this in one easy bound, but instead she jumped into it, turned sharp right-handed and ran for a hundred yards or more in the water, then she jumped out again, paused for a moment to shake herself and with an easy loping gait ran to the old shepherd's hut.

Here she stopped, momentarily flummoxed, and for the first time faintly frightened. An old broken-down water-butt stood by the hut; it was an easy

jump on to the top of that, and then a more difficult, but still possible, one on to the dilapidated roof. From the roof it was possible to get on to the overhanging branch of an oak tree that stood close by, and twice before she had gained this sanctuary and laid there, close pressed to the branch, her bright eyes watching the hounds and horses and pink coats ludicrously at fault two fields away. But now man had been here as well, and the oak tree no longer stood. Its sawed-up trunk lay in indignity on the turf.

The vixen lifted a fore paw and licked it where a sharp stone in the bed of the brook had cut the pad a little. Then, as though coming to a sudden decision, she shook herself, turned her muzzle uphill again, and set off at a great pace as straight as an arrow for Hangman's Holt. The Morechester Hunt was in for the fastest thing of its life.

Kingsley Hylton's hack from the Hoops had not always been a mere hack. It had come down by a long series of successive degradations to that ignominious position; it knew a great deal more about hunting than all the young horses out that day put together, and when it discovered that the man on its back was not altogether a fool at the game, it set out to enjoy itself.

Hounds came out of cover tentatively and checked slightly at the pool; from there they ran smartly to the brook, where they were sadly at fault, and minute after minute, every one as precious as life to the vixen, was lost.

Old Watchful, ranging far on the outskirts of the pack, came to their rescue, and when she spoke to it uncertainly a hundred yards away the huntsman put them on to her without hesitation. Her wise old nose had helped him out of many a difficulty before. They went mute and unconvinced as far as the hut, and then Gaiety and Witchcraft suddenly found their tongues and led the delighted, baying chorus. Bunched together so that a tea-cloth would have covered them, and screaming their heads off, they turned up the hill and went like the wind.

Hylton went with the best of them for a mile, but the pace was terrific, and three wide fields of plough put the old hack at the tail of the hunt. The Inspector wasn't sorry; he had never intended to waste all the morning chasing a fox, he was after another sort of killer; and a brutal-looking bullfinch gave him a welcome excuse to turn back. Instead of following the other laggards through a squelching gateway in the bottom corner of the field, he turned uphill, trotted along the headland, and finding a convenient gap, forced his way, at the ultimate expense of the Hunt Funds, on to the road.

There followed a slight argument with the hack, whose ancient blood was fired with the excitement of the chase; but Hylton won, and was presently trotting steadily back towards Hope Enderton. The hunt had already travelled in a rough quarter of a circle, so he was not as far away from the village as he might have been, and before long he was knock-

ing at the door of Fielden Cottage, which Sergeant White had already pointed out to him as belonging to Dale Shipley.

Mrs. Somers opened the door, and her first cheerful smile at seeing a gentleman in riding-clothes (such as they were!) soon yielded to a very different expression when Hylton began to ask questions, and she realized who he must be.

"I'm afraid I'm rather foolish about times and things like that," the Inspector said affably. "I just wanted to get it all quite plain about last Monday night."

"I can't tell you what I don't know."

"Quite so. It's what you do know I want to get at, Mrs.——"

"Somers, thank you. Mrs. Somers I am, and have been for twenty years, as anyone will tell you."

"Well now, Mrs. Somers, let me see, did Mr. Shipley have dinner here on Monday evening?"

"He did not. He went over to Captain Reeves, where he often does go."

"How often?"

"As often as he pleases."

"I suppose he motored over there?"

"No. He walked."

"Walked?"

"That's it. 'Mrs. Somers,' he said to me, 'it's a fine night, and I think I shall walk. I'm giving myself plenty of time.' 'That's right, sir,' I said, 'you do'; and that's all there was about it."

" What time was that, Mrs. Somers? "

" A quarter to seven exactly; I heard St. Leonard's strike."

Hylton considered . . . a quarter to seven. Young Shipley certainly had allowed himself plenty of time. The Inspector already knew from an intensive study of a six-inch Ordnance Map of the district that a moderate walker could hardly take longer than twenty minutes to get from Fielden Cottage to the Reeves' place.

" You're quite sure about the time, Mrs. Somers? " he asked.

" Perfectly. A quarter to seven it was, or a minute after. After the church clock struck, Mr. Shipley just said a word to me in the hall here, like I've told you, then he picked up his stick and went out."

" He took his stick? "

" He always does when he goes walking."

" Does Mr. Shipley often go walking in his dinner clothes? "

" Perhaps he doesn't; but what's the harm in folks walking out on a nice night if they've a mind to? "

" I don't say there's any harm in it, Mrs. Somers——"

" That's what I think. I must say I can see a deal more harm in ferreting about in other people's business, if you ask me."

The Inspector took his leave of this formidably loyal retainer, and mounting his horse, trotted gently over to Ferney House. A scurry of dogs greeted

him in the drive and kept up an ear-splitting din until the door was opened by a maid a deal younger and more susceptible to the presence of a mere male than the excellent Mrs. Somers.

Hylton found no difficulty in persuading her to tell him all she knew about Monday evening.

" I suppose it was rather a rush for you, with a party on, and everything," he said sympathetically.

" Oh, she always gets worried when there's anyone coming; you'd think it was Royalty itself coming to dinner, the way we all have to go on."

" And Captain Reeves wasn't back till late, was he? "

" Oh, the Captain. He's all right. He was back just about half-past five. He came back before from hunting and then went out somewhere again."

" And was back at half-past five. I see. And the guests, were they all up to time? "

" No, they weren't. Mrs. Reeves is always on at me about being late, so I made a special effort on Monday, in spite of Cook and her slow oven and everything. The little clock in the hall struck half-past seven just as I went past it, and I thought, ' Well, you can't have anything much more punctual than *that* '; and then, of course, when I told them dinner was ready, Mr. Shipley hasn't come, if you please. What's the good of being punctual, I'd like to know."

" Mr. Shipley hadn't come? "

" No. He didn't come for another five minutes,

and Cook and me nearly busting ourselves trying to keep the soup hot."

"I suppose when he did turn up Mr. Shipley looked as though he'd hurried a bit? "

The girl considered. "P'r'aps he did look a bit put about," she said finally, and the Inspector, watching her closely, shook his head; so far she had been in the realm of aggrieved fact and was reliable; his last question had opened up vistas to her cinema-fed mind of being able to establish connection with the village-shaking business up at the Court; and Hylton knew from bitter experience of her sort what fantastic worlds of sheer invention she would be capable of embarking on with only the slightest encouragement.

He decided to leave well alone, and withdrew. He turned out of the drive and had not gone very far down the road when he met Mrs. Reeves walking her horse slowly home. She smiled pleasantly at him.

" Had a spill? " he asked.

" No. Coconut overreached badly and I had to bring him back. Sickening, wasn't it? They're having one of the best runs ever. What happened to you? "

" It was too hot for me," Hylton laughed, " I just had to drop out."

She nodded and smiled again in her attractive way and they parted. Hylton kicked his old horse into a trot and went back to the Hoops. Sergeant White was waiting for him there, whiling away the time

with an unprofessional period of relaxation in the back snug. However, he became very much on parade as soon as the Inspector appeared; and presently—the worthy old hack being disposed of—they were closeted together in Hylton's private sitting-room.

" Got anything to tell me? " Hylton asked.

" Yes, sir, I have got something, though I don't know whether it means anything or not, but——"

" Just one minute, Sergeant. Walk over to that door behind you and poke your head into the billiard-room, will you? "

White did as he was bid. "Nobody there, sir," he said, a trifle surprised.

" Good. People who play billiards sometimes have long ears. Go ahead."

" It's this, sir." The Sergeant produced a small square of yellow cardboard from his pocket and put it carefully on the table. " Edwardes found it. He's our man on the back door at the Court. He was going off duty the other day and took a short cut across the bit of grass in front of the window——"

" The window of the room where it happened? "

" Yes, sir. A few yards away from the window he saw this and picked it up, thought it might be important."

Hylton very gingerly took up the exhibit and studied it. The cardboard had been folded in half down the middle and had lost something of its pristine freshness, but all the printing on it was still perfectly legible.

" ON THE NIGHT OF THE 18TH . . ."

LUXOR HAIRDRESSING SALOON

SPECIALISTS IN LADIES' COIFFEURS

SETTING AND WAVING A SPECIALITY

APPOINTMENT CARD

Time. 2.30 *Monday Jan.* 18*th.*

Telephone: Morechester 61.

Please bring this card with you. P.T.O.

The Inspector duly turned over only to learn that Perma Shampoo Powder was now all the rage. He reverted once more to the more informative side of the card.

" ' 2.30 Monday Jan. 18th,' " he said reflectively. " Edwardes looks like getting a putty medal if he keeps up this sort of thing. Go to the telephone just outside, Sergeant, ring up Morechester 61 and ask, very politely, who it was who booked an appointment for 2.30 last Monday. If they don't seem inclined to tell you, drop being polite and get official, but find out."

" Right-oh, sir."

Hylton drew out one of his thin, black cigars and lit it carefully. A woman in the case? . . . He wondered. . . . True, there nearly always was a woman in the case; lamentably true, too, that when there was she complicated things like the devil. . . .

" Did you get them? "

" Yes, sir; they were quite forthcoming about it, told me straight out."

" And who was it? "

" Mrs. Reeves of Ferney House, sir."

The Inspector took the cigar out of his mouth and gave a long, low whistle.

" Mrs. Reeves, eh? " he said. " Wife of Captain Reeves—there seems to be a devil of a lot in this business we haven't begun to get hold of yet, White."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE Inspector left the Hoops quickly and was over at Enderton Court as fast as his long legs could take him; he had decided to have a few plain words with Mr. Andrew Lumsdale before going on to see Mrs. Reeves.

He found Lumsdale in the kitchen, sitting down to a generous high tea and reading the paper.

"'Afternoon, Lumsdale."

"How do."

"I want a word with you."

"Ah'm always willing to talk."

"I'm glad to hear it, because you've got to this time, and talk straight, too."

Lumsdale slowly masticated his last mouthful of food and eyed his visitor in silent and defensive speculation.

"Now let me see," the Inspector went on briskly. "Last Monday: when you went in by bus to Morechester you went straight from the bus to the cinema, didn't you?"

"That's it."

"Without calling anywhere *en route*?"

"Ah went straight to t'pictures."

Hylton leaned back and said quite pleasantly, "You may not like to be told so, Lumsdale, but

you're a liar. You went straight from the bus to the post office, didn't you? "

The brooding, blank eyes looked at him steadily; the lantern jaws moved steadily, but the man said nothing.

" You went to the post office, didn't you, Lumsdale? "

" Ah might have gone in to get a few stamps, ah forget."

" True, you might have gone to get some stamps, and if that were all you might have forgotten about it. But it wasn't all, and you haven't forgotten. You went in to get something from the Poste Restante where you have a box under the name of Langley—that's so, isn't it? "

Lumsdale said nothing, but his steady stare was not quite so aggressively confident.

" And what's more, in the name of Langley, you have been in the habit of getting small packages from the Poste Restante every month or so for a goodish time, haven't you? "

" Well, suppose I have, what of it? "

Hylton leaned back and laughed softly. " You don't know as much as you think you do, Lumsdale, that's the trouble with your type," he said. " What's your full postal address here? "

" Enderton Court, Hope Enderton, Morechester."

" Exactly. Apparently you don't know that it's illegal to have a Poste Restante address in the same town as your ordinary, postal address."

" Ah'm no lawyer."

The Inspector leaned forward with a swift, almost menacing movement and spoke in a whip-like voice from which all semblance of pleasantness or raillery had disappeared.

"If you were, you wouldn't be such a damned fool, Lumsdale. You're in danger, and apparently you don't realize it. You stood to benefit very considerably by Arthur Burdett's death; you knew his habits; you knew every detail about the house. We've only got your word for it, mind, that Arthur Burdett wasn't alive when you came back on Monday evening and dead when you went out to find the Sergeant."

"My word's as good as any man's."

"Is it? When I look into what you tell me you were doing on Monday, the first thing I find is a lie. Many a man has been arrested and held on less suspicion than that, Andrew Lumsdale."

"What do you want me to do?"

"It isn't what I want, my friend, it's what the law demands. The law will find out who killed Arthur Burdett if it takes a year to do it. If you don't want to be arrested on suspicion this afternoon, you better tell me now what all this Poste Restante business means and what was in those packages."

Andrew Lumsdale was silent for a full minute, and when he spoke it was in a very different tone of voice from the surly defensiveness he had used so far.

"Look here, mister," he said, "I didn't kill Arthur Burdett. I know as things look a bit black against

me; I realized that from the start, but I never did it. In a way, you may almost say I was fond of the old fool. All the same I don't see why I should get into trouble for something as wasn't on my plate, as you may say, and that's why I kept quiet about the post office business."

"Very few people have got into trouble by telling the police the truth," the Inspector said dryly.

"All right, then." Lumsdale drew a key from his trouser pocket, crossed the kitchen and unlocked a drawer in the old-fashioned dresser. He rummaged about with both hands for half a minute and eventually brought out a collection of photographic postcards, and these he threw down in a heap on the table in front of the Inspector.

"That's what came in the packages," he said.

Kingsley Hylton picked up half a dozen of the photographs and studied them slowly, a curious conflict of emotions running through his brain. Principally he was thinking how true it was that with human nature you can never tell what will happen. . . .

Except as curiosities the photographs could hardly be said to interest him. In his time, in Paris, Port Said and the bad quarter of Marseilles, he had come across some pretty filthy representations, but for sheer bestial pornography, exhibiting every possible perversion of all decency and every hideously blasphemous parody that a twisted mind could think of, he had never seen the equal of what he handled now in the old-fashioned kitchen of Enderton Court. He felt slightly sick.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"Mister, those cards haven't anything to do with me," Lumsdale said so earnestly as to carry conviction. "I'll swear to that on oath. Those are what the old fool used to like to look at. Sit in that cold room of his for hours, he would, looking at those things and laughing to himself. I had to get them for him. When I first came here he told me that he had important parcels coming from abroad—Paris, they came from—and he wanted me to give the name of Langley at the post office and collect anything as came. At first I thought it was all right, but after a bit I saw one or two of these lying about, and I soon tumbled to it. Well, if the old fool wanted the things, I wasn't going to lose my job by refusing to get them from the post office; but when the business happened on Monday and I had to give a time-table like of what I was doing, I left out my visit to the post office. It didn't have anything to do with the murder, and I thought if you found out about it I'd get into trouble."

Hylton thought for a moment. Truth always has an unmistakable ring of its own, and he was inclined to believe that he was getting the genuine article now.

"What are these filthy things doing in a drawer in the kitchen?" he asked suddenly.

"Well, ah don't suppose you'll believe about that, mister, but this is how it is. When I came back on Monday and found the old boy dead, almost the first thing I thought about was these here photographs. I knew where he kept them, in a drawer in that room

of his, and I thought, 'Police'll search everything in that room of his, bound to, and then it'll get out about the old fool having these.' Of course it wouldn't have mattered in a way; I suppose when you're dead you don't mind what people say about you, but somehow I didn't like to think of it, so before ever I went down to fetch the Sergeant I cleared the drawer out and brought them here."

"Why didn't you burn 'em?"

"I'm going to, mister; but I hadn't seen 'em all, and ah suppose a man's human like everybody else."

"Pitch 'em on the fire now," Hylton ordered curtly. "It makes me almost ashamed to be human when I see stuff like that."

Lumsdale obediently gathered the mass of pornography together and fed the flames with it.

Hylton watched the process in silence, and when it was over asked abruptly, "Did Mrs. Reeves ever come here?"

"Once or twice, she did."

"And her husband?"

"I've never known him come."

"Um." The Inspector got up and made for the door, but before he reached it he turned round.

"Now look here, Lumsdale," he said, "what you've told me just now may or may not be true. At present I'm inclined to think it is; but in any case I shall find out. You're still in a nasty position, and if you want to keep out of trouble just go on telling the truth. Do you get that?"

A somewhat chastened Andrew Lumsdale nodded. " All right, mister."

The Inspector walked from Enderton Court in a reflective frame of mind. " A man's human like everybody else," Lumsdale had said, and Kingsley Hylton found it hard to keep out of his thoughts altogether the memory of some of the grotesque indecencies he had just been looking at. There was a sort of revolting fascination about them, and an even more revolting fascination about the thought of the man, long past any of the lustful pleasures of life, hunched in gloating delight over such vicarious joys.

Twenty minutes later Kingsley Hylton was being smiled at by the maid at Ferney House on whom he had already made a good impression. . . . Yes, Mrs. Reeves was in, and the Captain; would he please to come in. . . .

The Inspector found Captain Reeves and his wife sitting in the drawing-room with a copy of *Horse and Hound* open between them trying to make up their minds about spending £95 on a black mare whose accomplishments sounded too good to be true this side of Paradise, the discussion being punctuated by the Captain's almost lyrical account of the day's hunting from which he had only just returned.

Mrs. Reeves gave the Inspector an affable welcome; the Captain looked at him and grunted.

Hylton refused the offer of tea.

" No; no tea, thank you. I've come on business."

" About old Burdett? " Reeves asked.

" About the murder."

"Then in that case my wife better leave us."

"I'd rather she didn't. It's Mrs. Reeves that I want to see at the moment."

"And what the devil do you suppose a woman can have to do with that business?"

"Pat, please——" Nellie Reeves put in.

Kingsley Hylton sat in a chair, pulled his trousers up slightly to avoid damaging the creases, and crossed his legs. He was beginning to feel a little terse with the inhabitants of Hope Enderton.

"Captain Reeves," he said, "I dare say you pride yourself on being a loyal, law-abiding citizen, don't you?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Just this, that at present you are behaving either like a criminal, and not a clever one at that, or a sulky schoolboy. A crime has been committed here, and in the name of the law I am appointed to find out who did it. I shall find out, because ultimately the resources of the law are longer than those of the criminal, don't worry about that. Meanwhile it is up to all the decent citizens of the place to help me——"

"I've already told you that I went to the Court on Monday afternoon."

"And refused to say why you went there."

"That's my business."

"And the law's. However, at present all I ask is for you to be quiet whilst I ask your wife a few questions."

"Pat, for heaven's sake don't make things more

awkward than they are," his wife begged. "Go on, Mr. Hylton, we may as well get this over; what is it you want?"

"Have you ever been to Enderton Court, Mrs. Reeves?"

Nellie Reeves darted a distressed look across the room at her husband before answering, "Yes—I have—twice."

"Were you there on Monday the 18th?"

"Last Monday? No."

Hylton let that pass for the moment. "Tell me," he said, "were these visits of yours to the Court just in the ordinary way of social calls?"

Again that troubled look shot across the room.

"I really don't see that you can pry into private business like that," Reeves broke in angrily, and almost as sharply his wife answered, "Oh, Pat, for goodness sake let's get the wretched thing cleared up and done with."

"Not a bad idea," Hylton concurred. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Sorry. Where are the cigarettes, Pat?"

"No, thanks, I'll have one of these." Carefully he selected and lit one of his thin cigars. "Now let's have it, Mrs. Reeves," he urged.

"Well, it's a beastly story, though of course in a way it had nothing to do with me. You know what an old miser Burdett was, and I don't suppose anyone has called socially at the Court for twenty years. He wouldn't have opened the door to you if you had. But I'm secretary of the Poultry and Damage Fund

in the hunt, and of course a good deal of the land we hunt over belongs to old Burdett.

" About a month or so ago I got a scrawl from him saying would I go and see him about some damage to the fences on his farms. Of course I went. He spun a long, rambling yarn—I couldn't quite make out what it was all about; as far as I could see there wasn't any damage at all really, but I wanted to humour him in case he had got a grievance. I thought he acted a bit queerly then—you know what I mean—I suppose some men always are a bit queer with women, and sometimes the old ones are the worst; but it wasn't too bad, and I managed not to take any notice of it. Then last Saturday he asked me up there again and said it was about some hunt business. I didn't quite like the sound of it, but we can't afford to fall out with him and so I went."

Mrs. Reeves stopped and glanced across at her husband as though seeking help in telling the next part of her story, but Reeves sat looking as black as thunder and said nothing.

"You went up there?" Hylton prompted.

"I went up there and, Inspector, it—it was horrible. I didn't know men could be quite so beastly. He made an excuse to sit near me and then began to paw me. I hardly knew what to do, it was all so beastly and so stupid. Then suddenly he brought out some awful post-card things and asked me if I would like to look at them with him. I only saw one—well, I only half saw that, and then I got up and fled. When I got back home I was half cry-

ing, half laughing. I think he must have been a little mad. Of course Pat saw I was upset, and worried me till I told him about it all. He wanted to go up and have it out with old Burdett, but I wouldn't let him. He was in a towering rage and I was afraid of what he might do, so I begged him not to go. He spent all Sunday smouldering over it, and on Monday, when we were out hunting, suddenly said he couldn't stand it any longer and went back early to go up to the Court. The next thing we heard about Arthur Burdett was that he was dead. Of course it was a terrible shock to us both; we talked it over that night when everyone had gone and decided not to say anything about it; but when you came on the scene Pat said he wouldn't be happy till he had gone and told you about his visit, and anyway somebody might have seen him—though he didn't think so because he used the back drive so as to avoid going past the Lodge—and it would be far worse if you found out about it; so on Wednesday he went and told you he had been, but I made him promise not to say why. I was so afraid it would all have to come out at the inquest, and I simply couldn't face that. Ever since then I have been scared stiff lest you should suspect Pat of—of—of killing him, and now, thank God, you know the whole thing."

Reeves chimed in, deliberately holding himself in reserve and speaking quite reasonably:

"You may not believe it, Inspector, but that's all gospel truth. I admit I wasn't very polite when I called on you at the Hoops, and I'm sorry, but

you can guess what I was feeling like. And, my God, if he'd been my own age I would have beaten the filthy old swine up and enjoyed it."

Kingsley Hylton contemplated his long cigar for a minute in silence; unless these people were a lot, lot deeper than he took them to be he was inclined to think that he had got at the truth about their share in the matter, or at any rate at a good portion of it; there still remained one thing to be cleared up, however.

" What were you doing at half-past two on Monday afternoon, Mrs. Reeves? " he asked, watching the woman closely with his penetrating and rather frightening eyes.

" At half-past two? Hunting."

" You're sure of that? "

" Yes, positive. I wasn't home till after three."

" Are you quite sure, Mrs. Reeves, that you weren't at the Luxor Saloon having your hair done? "

" At the Luxor——" Mrs. Reeves laughed. " It's quite true that I had an appointment there for half-past two on Monday," she said, " though I don't know how you knew it——"

" Never mind *how* I know. You had the appointment? "

" Yes."

" And didn't keep it ?"

" No. I went on Friday instead. I rang them up on Friday morning and asked if they could possibly change my appointment and give it to

somebody else, and after a bit of bother they said they could."

" Who went in your place on Monday? "

" I honestly can't tell you that. I didn't worry about it, all I wanted to do was to get another time for myself."

Hylton nodded and rose from his chair.

" I wish you'd told me all this on Wednesday, Captain Reeves," he said. " It might have saved me a lot of trouble, and we find out in the end, you know."

Somewhere in his hot nature the Captain found the grace to apologize.

" I'm sorry that I didn't, Inspector. Probably it would have been best, but I think you'll agree it was a pretty beastly business to have your wife mixed up in."

Hylton took his leave and walked quickly down the dark drive, thinking hard. Temporarily, at least, he was prepared to transfer the Reeves and Andrew Lumsdale from the Probables list to the Possibles. What he wanted to do now was to find out who it was who had her hair done in the Luxor Saloon at half-past two on Monday, and the sooner he got into Morechester to make inquiries in person the better pleased he would be.

He hadn't gone a hundred yards along the road before a car, overtaking him, slowed down and stopped.

When he drew level a cheerful voice called out, " How far are you going? "

" Enderton would help me, but I'm really bound for Morechester.."

" I'm going through Morechester. Jump in."

The Inspector climbed in beside the driver without delay, and sat back in the comfortable seat thanking his lucky stars.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE Good Samaritan of the road turned out to be a character. In less than five minutes he had gratuitously contributed a good deal of his life history and two more than racy stories to the conversation.

As they passed through Enderton he gave it as his opinion that it wouldn't be a bad idea to stop for a tankard of ale.

"Not here, though," were his second thoughts; "the only barmaid here is a solid lump of vinegary virtue. Now there's a little thing in a pub about three miles the other side, between here and Morechester, who really is the goods. Talk about come up and see me some time; she wasn't born last Friday, I tell you. . . . Hallo, hallo, what's all this?"

The headlights showed up a tatterdemalion figure standing by the roadside and waving a forlorn hope of an arm. The young man seemed to enjoy giving people lifts (and, indeed, he did, to be alone was damnation to him).

"What's the matter with you, Weary Willy?" he called out as the car stopped.

"Have ye got room for a poor old man in the

back, sir? " the figure asked in the schooled whine of the professional tramp and beggar.

" Poor old man be damned. With all the walking you do I'll bet you're a darned sight healthier than I am; and you've probably got hundreds of pounds sewn up in your pants."

" My God, guvnor, I wish I 'ad."

" Hop in."

" Hop " is hardly an accurate description of the tramp's method of introducing his amazing collection of coats and wraps and packages into the car, but for all that few people could have accomplished the entry more quickly.

" Tell us your life history, Weary Willy," the young man cheerfully commanded as he started off again. " No, don't bother for the minute. I've just thought of what that girl said in the Criterion Brasserie—you know the one I was telling you about" —this to the amused Hylton—" before we started on barmaids. As a matter of fact it was extraordinarily funny because when she woke up in the morning and found this fellow's top hat on the bedpost she didn't know what to make of it. According to her she looked carefully in the bed, and under it, and all over the room; no man anywhere; and yet there was the topper. Intriguing, to put it mildly; and as she very reasonably pointed out, disappointing. I mean, a man without a topper is much more use to a girl really than a topper without a man, in spite of what the feminists, if that's the word I want, may say. What added to the

mystery was that the door was locked all the time on the inside—quite a detective yarn really. Anyway, what Mami said—was it Mami by the way? No, it can't have been. Mami was the ginger-haired one in Brighton, or was that Dimples? Yes, that must have been Dimples, because it was going up the steps of the Metropole that her knickers fell down and sort of hobbled her ankles. That was definitely embarrassing. Of course Dimples—or dammit was that Flick?—anyway, whoever it was got away with it all right, but some girls wouldn't—my Aunt Amelia for instance, oh great suffering cats, no." The young man laughed quietly, no doubt at the memory of his aunt. "Where were we? Oh, yes, about Mami—if it was Mami. Now I come to think of it, Mami was the one who bet she could drink eleven crème de menthes in rapid succession. Podger lost that little bet; my hat, there's a lad of the village for you—hallo, hallo; oh, my Gawd, what's this? Looks like my night out all right."

Once more the car slowed and stopped in obedience to an upraised arm; but this time an arm upraised not in doubtful entreaty, but in assured command. A young constable, note-book in hand, barred the way.

"January, the twenty ruddy third," the young man groaned, somewhat to Hylton's mystification.

The young constable stuck his head through the side window.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir," he said mechanically;

"just a matter of checking the new licences, seeing they're all in order."

"That's all right," the young man answered affably, "but don't let us waste your time; and anyway we're in a bit of a hurry ourselves, so perhaps we could push on."

"'Arf a minute, sir, 'arf a minute. I 'aven't looked at the licence yet."

The zealous policeman brought his electric torch into operation and was back again in a minute with a different quality in his voice.

"I'm afraid this 'ere won't do, sir," he said; "this ends December 31st, 1935."

"Does it?" the young man asked, as though astounded at such fickleness on the part of the licence.

"It does. 'Ave you got the new one, sir?"

"The new one? I can't say that I have. I thought we had days of grace or something."

"Fourteen days grace, sir; that there ended on January 14th, and it's a week since then, now."

"Oh—is it?"

"I'm afraid I shall 'ave to 'ave your name and address, sir."

"How the ruddy law does prey on motorists," the young man said with fervour. "Charles Henry Fanshawe, Marden House, Over Green, Sussex, England, land of ruddy freedom."

The constable poked himself well into the dimly lit interior of the car the better to get all this down in his eager note-book.

"And you, sir?" he asked Hylton.

The Inspector had purposely kept his face hidden as much as possible. It was really of no consequence, but all the same he was not particularly anxious to be recognized by the Force at the moment.

"George Baker, 14 Marylebone Street, London."

"And in the back," the young man prompted explosively, "we have Exhausted Egbert of The Haystack, Under the Sky, Everywhere. Now you've got the lot of us."

In no wise deterred, the constable turned his attention for a moment to the back of the car.

"I presume as you are giving this 'ere person a lift," he said.

"Good Lord, no! That's One Shot Sam, the notorious bandit; he held us up and forced us to drive him at his pleasure. Don't touch him or he'll explode. Can't you see his revolver?"

The constable closed his book with a snap; such levity did not commend itself to him. "I'm afraid you'll be 'earing more about this, Mr. Fanshawe," he said.

"I don't doubt it," Charles Fanshawe answered bitterly as he engaged bottom gear. "Now go and pinch somebody for selling a stick of chocolate after eight o'clock."

The constable reintroduced his head into the car long enough to point out that as a matter of fact it wasn't yet after eight o'clock.

"Can you beat it?" Fanshawe asked as they moved away again. "Wouldn't that ruddy well

burn you up? Just my luck. I kept putting off getting that darned licence till I clean forgot about it. Well, that's a fiver up the spout, anyway. Here's the pub I was telling you about where the barmaid is. I suppose it's her night off as well. Let's stop and have one, shall we? "

Hylton had not the heart to urge the hurry he was in, and they duly climbed out of the car on the cobbled approach in front of the inn.

" Come on, Cut-throat Cuthbert," Fanshawe called out boisterously to the tramp, " you may as well drown your sorrows with the rest of us."

The figure in the back of the car needed no second invitation, and within half a minute they were all three standing in the bar.

" Here, let me do this," Hylton begged, but young Fanshawe wouldn't hear of it. He slapped down half a crown on the counter and ordered three pints of beer in tankards. In the matter of the barmaid his luck still held good; it was not her night off, and she appeared as pleased to see him as he was to see her. Naturally a fully detailed account of his recent misfortune was recounted, in the course of which Hylton was able to return the honours, and three fresh tankards were supplied.

Fanshawe drained his in two workmanlike gulps and said, " Well, I suppose we better be getting along. How much farther are you coming, Desperate Dick? "

" This 'ere'll do me, thank 'ee, sir," the tramp said.

Charles Fanshawe had in him a lot of that true,

immediate and practical charity from which most of the social reformers of the world shudder in conveniently pious horror.

"I expect you're every sort of rascal unhanged," he said, "but I suppose you'll want something for supper. Drink yourself to death on this."

The tramp took the proffered two shillings in surprise. In a curious way the gift seemed to affect him quite strongly.

"My name's Alf Durley," he said, "and I reckon you two gennelmen *are* gennelmen. Treated me properly, you 'ave. And no one's ever done me a good turn and not got it back." He laughed. "That bleeding rozzer didn't half throw 'is weight about, didn't 'e? But 'e didn't know everything, any road. 'E didn't know as I'd taken this, for a start."

Mr. Durley fished about in his voluminous clothing and produced a small, black-covered book, complete with elastic strap, which he threw on the counter.

"My God, the Robert's note-book," Fanshawe cried in incredulous delight. "How the hell did you get that, Tired Tim?"

"We aren't all as soft as we look," Mr. Durley replied cryptically.

Fanshawe, only just beginning to realize the full richness of the joke, was in transports of delighted mirth over it, and immediately called for more beer to celebrate the occasion; but Kingsley Hylton, though amused, was a trifle thoughtful.

Problem of the week: how far in conscience can

an Inspector of H.M. Police allow a constable's note-book to be stolen and say or do nothing about it? Especially when bound in the matter by a debt of gratitude to a young man who will suffer from its restoration?

The Inspector was turning this problem over in his mind, not quite certain how to tackle it. He decided to temporize. When Mr. Durley had explored his various garments to produce the note-book, Hylton's quick eye had spotted the shining top of something he hardly expected to see in a tramp's waistcoat pocket.

" Nice cigarette-case you've got there," he said.

Mr. Durley obligingly produced the case for further inspection. " Not too bad, is it? " he said; " worth a shilling or two, I'll be bound. What it wants is twenty Gold Flake inside it to make it look better." He opened the case to show its lamentable emptiness, and Hylton gave a start. Engraved on the inside of the case, in the replica of a flamboyant, feminine hand, were the words:

Dale Shipley
from R. 1932

" How did you come by that? " he asked at length.

Mr. Durley restored the case to one of his many pockets and gave a wink. " Sometimes things 'appen very fortunate in this world," he remarked.

" Drink up your beer and come on," Fanshawe urged, " or I shall be late."

Kingsley Hylton had come to the conclusion that

action of some sort was now imperative. Emulating Mr. Durley's aptness at producing surprising things from pockets, he brought out his note-book and picked out from it his blue card of identity.

"Half a minute," he said, speaking quietly so as not to attract the attention of the barmaid. "I didn't want to parade the fact, but I'm afraid I've got to now. I am a Detective Inspector from Scotland Yard. You probably don't believe me, so here's my card."

Stupefied silence followed this somewhat staggering revelation; silence broken by the tragic tones of Mr. Alf Durley.

"My oath," that astonished man exclaimed poignantly, "my berleeding oath. D'you mean to say as 'ow you're a flattie?"

"I'm afraid so," Hylton said, almost apologetically, "it is a bit awkward, isn't it?"

Durley suddenly broke into a torrent of apprehensive explanation. "Look 'ere, mister, I just picked that case up, straight I did; the young gennelman dropped it. I didn't know 'oo 'e was, 'ow could I? I just popped it in my pocket, 'oping to see 'im again; why, I wouldn't touch a thing like that not for——"

"What young gentleman?"

"Strike me, guv'nor, I don't know, I'm telling you. Met me down on the road there a day or two ago, last Monday night it was, because——"

"Last Monday night? What time?"

"'Bout 'arf-past seven it must 'ave been. I didn't do anything. Why, is it likely——"

" Where? "

" Where the back lane comes down from the big yeller 'ouse where the old gent was kiboshed—'ere, blimey, guv'nor, don't get mixing me up with that lot, for Gawd Almighty's sake. Alf Durley 'ad nothing——"

" All right, don't get excited, Durley; but——"

" Is this the straight goods," Fanshawe interrupted, " or are you pulling our legs? "

" No. It's true right enough. I do happen to be from Scotland Yard, though I've nothing to do with the local police."

Charles Fanshawe made a comic gesture. " Looks as though I'm for it after all," he lamented—" about the licence, I mean."

" Well, look here," Hylton said, " if you run me and this man, Durley, back to Hope Enderton at once and get your new licence to-morrow, I dare say you'll find that nothing comes of it. How's that? "

Fanshawe was already leading the way to the door to fulfil his part of the bargain. " I was meeting a bird in Morechester," he said, " but she'll have to wait a bit, that's all."

Alf Durley re-entered the car only under considerable protest. His view of the Universe was as black as is only possible when a man does a purely gratuitous act of kindness and gets landed in trouble thereby. He swore generously, roundly and convincingly under his breath: " Of all the berleeding luck . . ."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SERGEANT WHITE was just getting his supper out of the oven when the Inspector arrived with Mr. Durley.

Alf Durley paled visibly at the sight of a blue uniform and immediately launched out into an elaboration of the aggrieved expostulations which he had been making all the way there in the car.

"Shut up, Durley," Hylton said kindly but firmly. "No one's going to get you into trouble. In fact I guarantee to get you out of everything, if you have the sense to tell us all you can—when I ask for it."

Alf Durley subsided into suspicious silence and watched his natural enemies from his bloodshot, beady little eyes, cursing them and luck and Almighty God impartially under his breath.

"Sorry to disturb you, White, at your supper, but rather a queer thing's happened." Hylton gave a rapid account of what had taken place in the car, and the Sergeant's handsome, attentive face went through the appropriate stages of amusement and surprise.

"That's a rum go, sir," he said when Hylton had finished.

"It is. And it'll be rummier yet, I feel somehow.

Now look here, Durley, sit down and stop scowling. All I want is a bit of information out of you, and it'll pay you to give me all you can. If you act sensibly I'll see you get out of this little mess" (the Inspector waved the stolen note-book threateningly); "if you don't, I'll take damned good care you get it hot and strong, see?"

Durley nodded.

"All right. Let's have your yarn about last Monday night—got your book handy, White?—take your time and tell the truth. Now then."

Alf Durley looked pained at the mere suggestion that he might so much as contemplate not telling the truth.

"I've got nothing to 'ide," he whined. "I never got mixed up in nothing. Sunday night I was in the casual at Fentown—the workhouse-master'll tell you the same, 'e knows me all right. Monday, I did my bit in the morning, and was on the road afore eleven. I got a bit of work to do in the afternoon chopping wood for an old lady; she gave me a hand-out for it and a bob—decent old party. Time it was dark I was on the road again. 'Bout 'arf-past seven it would be, or not quite, I was looking in a field at the corner where the side road comes down from the big 'ouse. 'Corse I knew it was no good going up *there*, we all know what 'e is, or was, I should say, wouldn't give you a cup of water if 'e saw you in 'ell. Well, I was looking in this 'ere field——"

"What for?"

"Nothing in particular—just to see if there was

anything to pick up like, and when I turned round and came out of the gateway on to the road I bumped into this 'ere young gennelman."

"Where was he coming from?"

"Why, down this 'ere side lane as I've told you about."

"You're sure of that?"

"'Corse I'm sure. I was on the turnpike and 'e was acoming down the side road, and going at a 'ell of a bat, practically bumped into each other; made him jump as much as it did me, almost. 'What the devil are you doing 'ere?' he says, very angry like. I told him I wasn't doing anything. 'Poaching, I'll be bound,' 'e says; 'well don't poach round 'ere,' 'e says, 'it isn't 'ealthy. See this stick?' 'E waved a stick as 'e'd got at me. 'There's a pound of lead let into the end of that bit of ash,' 'e says; 'that's the sort of medicine we keep for poachers round 'ere.' We argued the toss a bit, and 'e kept waving 'is stick at me, and I kept saying as I wasn't doing anything, and then off 'e went along the turnpike."

"And in the course of the conversation you stole his cigarette-case?" Hylton asked.

This was precisely what Alf Durley, being an expert pickpocket, had done; but having told the strict truth for five minutes or so consecutively, he felt that a little deviation into the realms of imagination was now not only permissible, but highly desirable.

"Guv'nor," he said, with great earnestness, "swelp me bob, when the young toff suddenly goes off and

leaves me there, what do I see lying on the ground? This 'ere case; must 'ave fallen out of 'is pocket when 'e was awaving of that there murderous stick about. 'Corse I picked it up, but as for *stealing* it——"

Hylton laughed and dismissed the matter for the moment with a wave of his hand.

"Never mind about that for the present," he said. "Read out what you've got down, White, and see if Durley agrees with it. By the way, Durley, you're not on oath or anything; and all this can't be used against you in any way, so don't get the wind up; it's simply a matter of voluntarily helping the police at the moment, see?"

Alf Durley nodded lugubriously. Bitter experience had taught him that it was never healthy to have anything at all to do with the police, even in their most amiable moods, and he sorrowfully regretted signalling for that fatal lift earlier in the evening.

"What did you do then?" Hylton asked. "Go up to the Court?"

"Up to the big 'ouse? No, that I didn't, mister. Don't get mixing me up with that, for Gawd's sake. I've told you already it was no good agoing up there for anything. I came straight into Enderton, that's what I did; why, I was in the 'Oops 'aving a pint before eight, I can prove it."

"All right. I dare say we can check that." Hylton drew out one of his black cigars, a sure sign that his mind had some congenial problem to wrestle with. "Ring up Morechester, Sergeant, and tell 'em

to have a cell ready; we'll have to keep you for the night, Durley."

"What, keep me, guv'nor! Whaffor?"

"Technically on a charge of stealing by finding, but I'll see it doesn't come to anything if you behave yourself and help us."

Mr. Alfred Durley felt too aggrieved to argue; that out of an attempt to do a good turn to a gentleman who befriended him such unpleasant complications should arise seemed altogether too cruel a stroke of fate. He contained himself in a dignified and injured silence until the police car came from Morechester to take him to his night's free but unwelcome lodging.

The moment Durley had gone the Inspector began to talk. "Let's have a look at that six-inch Ordnance Map of yours, White. Good—where are we? Fielden Cottage—here; now then Fielden Cottage to Ferney House, here's the obvious way to go, by road —where's your ruler?—how far do you make it?"

"I always reckon it just about a mile, sir."

"So does the map—a shade under, if anything. How long would Dale Shipley take to walk a mile?"

"About a quarter of an hour; he's a pretty active young gentleman."

"Give him twenty minutes at the outside. He left Fielden Cottage at a quarter to seven, White, a quarter to, mark you; when does he arrive at Ferney House?"

"Seven o'clock or five past, sir?"

"After half-past, White."

The Sergeant whistled.

"Exactly. I've checked those times up pretty accurately. Mr. Shipley's got half an hour to explain away somehow. Let's have another look at the map —where's that side lane that runs up to the back drive of the Court?"

"Here, sir."

"Good. Now what on earth would a man walking from Fielden Cottage to Ferney House be doing coming down there?"

White shook his head. "It's off his route, sir, that's certain."

Hylton pushed the map away and lit his cigar. "Well," he said, "Mr. Shipley may be able to explain away that half-hour and the side lane business; all I can say is I shall be very interested to hear what the explanation is. And look here, Sergeant"—he leaned over the table and waved his cigar at the attentive White—"it isn't only the half-hour business. Just see how Shipley fits in. We know (though he doesn't know we know it) that he had a row with the old boy only last week, and that as a result he was cut out of the will entirely. It's a million to one Burdett told him that, and anyone who has suddenly lost a matter of sixty thousand through an old man's spite is apt to feel a trifle sore. That gives us motive. Shipley would know that Lumsdale would be out on a Monday, of course; and, moreover, when old Burdett went to the door and saw his nephew there, he wouldn't hesitate to let him in. Opportunity.

And White—oh, White, just think about the clubs, how beautifully clear it makes that."

"Well, I can't say I quite tumble to it, Inspector."

"Just suppose we found the old boy with his head bashed in and no weapon evident. The first thing we do is to look for one. Shipley, being a half-nephew and expecting to inherit and so on, would naturally have come in for questioning, and sooner or later we should have found out about his ash stick with the pound of lead in it; and straight off it would have looked a likely sort of instrument; nothing certain about it, of course, but still we should have had our eye on it. But Mr. Shipley was too clever for that. Shall I tell you what happened that Monday night, Sergeant?"

White nodded; he seemed a little put about by such sudden developments.

"Young Shipley leaves his place at a quarter to seven. He knows that his uncle, whom he never liked, has cut him out entirely from the will and so ruined all he was looking forward to. He's stone-cold, consuming angry. He gets to the Court just after seven and rattles on the door, his stick behind his back. The old man shuffles over the hall and opens the door a few inches.

"'I say, uncle, I want to have a word with you and apologize about that row the other day.'

"Burdett mumbles something and undoes the chain. They go into the little sitting-room together, young Shipley's heart going like a sledge-hammer and the blood drumming in his ears. He's doing

what men literally do at times, White, he's seeing red.

"In the room old Burdett whips round on him. 'Sucking up to me now to try and get the money back, eh? Well, you won't!' Something like that, and Shipley's control snaps, out flies his stick and out run the old man's brains. It's over in three minutes, and for another three Shipley stands there staring at what he's done, unable to believe it. Then with a rush he begins to realize things. He hasn't fingered anything; no fingerprints; but his stick is what worries him; the weapon always does worry them, I've learnt that. They think the whole world's watching them if they try to throw it away. And besides, things thrown away can be found. Shipley isn't a fool; he keeps his head, and there and then he thinks of a darned clever trick. He spots those heavy clubs up on the wall, stands on a chair and gets one down; on second thoughts he brings the other down, too, and hangs it on the lower nail. Then he takes one of them and deliberately smears the end of it in the blood and brain and general mess on the old man's head—hello, what's up?"

The Sergeant had turned quite pale.

"My God, sir," he said, swallowing hard, "you quite turned me up the way you tell it."

"Not nice, is it? But I think it's what he did; and damned clever, too, because we never thought of looking any further for the weapon at first. Then he picks up his stick, and carrying it carefully, goes out of the front door. Call it 7.20, no more. Half-

way down the back drive he wipes the end of his stick in the grass under the hedge—no one's going to find that. When he's satisfied it's clean, he goes on into the lane; by 7.25 he's at the junction of the side lane and the road, and he bumps into our heaven-provided and providential tramp. Of course, it startled him —just think of the state his nerves are in! "

" And do you mean to say he'd start waving his stick at the tramp and telling about it the way he did if he had just committed a—a murder with it? "

"Not 'if'; *because*. Have you ever had to do with a murderer, White? I have. Two or three of 'em. Murdering somebody is just about ten times as intoxicating as getting blind drunk. Do you know, actually, what a man who has killed somebody wants to do most? He wants to get hold of the first person he meets, shake him by the shoulder and shout out, 'I've killed somebody, I'm a murderer!' It may sound funny, but it's true. When young Shipley was waving his stick at friend Durley and saying, 'This is the stuff we keep for poachers,' or whatever it was, what he was actually longing to say was, 'See this stick? I've just done an old fool in with it; that's the kind of chap I am.'"

Sergeant White nodded sombrely. "You make it sound very convincing, Inspector," he said, "but somehow—well, I wouldn't like to think young Shipley was mixed up in it."

"I shall suspect you, Sergeant, of being a sentimentalist soon," Hylton laughed. "God knows we haven't got a cast-iron case against Shipley, or any-

thing like; but at the same time things are shaping up; shaping up, and they'll take a lot of answering. I'm afraid Mr. Shipley is going to have rather an unpleasant day to-morrow. Meanwhile let's clear our brains a bit—get the chessmen out."

Without further comment, White produced the board and men and the two of them settled down to a game. The Sergeant did not show quite the same command of things that he exhibited at their first encounter, and after a little more than an hour's play they found themselves involved in a rather dreary stalemate.

Hylton was pleased not to be beaten again, and he stopped to talk for a few minutes when the board and men had been put away.

As he was taking his leave he turned on the doorstep and asked, " Where's Mrs. White, by the way? "

" Over at her sister's, sir, at Nyeton; she often pops over there for an evening."

" Hope she won't mind my beastly cigar smoke all over the house. Don't be late in the morning, Sergeant."

" Very good, sir."

" Good night."

" Good night, Inspector."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HARRY SMALL, the Nyeton gamekeeper, jerked his head up; he hoped he had heard a tap-tapping on the kitchen window. He waited for an instant and the sound came again, unmistakable this time. Small smiled, drew his finely-made body out of the chair and went in his stockinged feet to the back door.

He had been waiting for that tap; waiting for it in pleasurable expectation, sitting there before the glowing fire, his coat off because of the heat of the room, his boots kicked off for comfort.

Harry Small was a big, broad-shouldered, dark man, with a body made as hard as hickory by the early risings and the long hours in the open which his job demanded. He was a courageous man (a gamekeeper has need to be) and a simple one; his body understood and revelled in the primitive, uncomplicated feelings. A gamekeeper learns to value most things with an elemental foot-rule; he sees a good deal of death in his day's work, but a good deal also of life; of dog-fox running with vixen, dog with bitch, buck with doe, all the strong surging and uprising of the instinct to mate. Henry Small understood all that and sympathized with it. Six feet exactly he stood in his stockinged feet, his shirt open at the throat, his well-cut corduroy breeches showing

off his strong legs. He crossed the unlighted kitchen and lifted the latch of the back door.

"That you, Alice?" he asked.

Alice White gave a little laugh and came into the room tossing her head; the wind was blowing outside and she seldom troubled about wearing a hat.

"Nice fool you'd have looked if it wasn't," she said. "You ought to be more careful with your names, Harry."

Small laughed. "Oh, hell, you're as bad as that husband of yours." He stood looking at her for a moment in admiration; a shaft of light from the front room fell on her like the limelight of a theatre; she was panting a little and her cheeks were flushed. There was that look about her that Small loved, the half-wild, courageous look, ready to defy anything, to dare all. . . . He caught his breath sharply. "My God," he said, "you look a picture."

She laughed again. "Like me, Harry?"

"I might have meant a picture of misery. You've hurried, haven't you?"

"I'm at my sister's."

"And where does she think you are?"

"On the way home. I can't stay long, Harry."

"Hell, you'll stay as long as I want."

"Will I?"

Small moved up to her, amazingly neatly for so big a man, and caught her in one vice-like arm.

"Yes, you will."

She upturned her face.

"You haven't kissed me yet, Harry."

"Plenty of time."

"I don't know—we might all be dead in a year."

"You say some funny things, me dear—there, how's that?"

Alice White took her full red lips away from the man's reluctantly. Her eyes were shut, she was breathing quickly.

God, who makes all His puppets differently, had fashioned her out of no dull, ordinary, lifeless clay; blood ran very warmly in her and the pulse of life beat fast; sometimes she would defend herself in desperate argument with herself about it. "*I can't help it, it's the way I'm made. . . .*"

"Come into the other room and sit in front of the fire."

"All right—but I really mustn't stay long, Harry, you know what Jimmy is."

"What he is? Of course I do, he's your husband."

This witticism made Small laugh out loud, and Alice joined him with that deep, short laughter of hers—the cruellest laughter in the world, that of an entirely selfish woman.

But she checked herself for an instant.

"My God, if he ever found out."

"Scared?"

"Put your arm round me—not a bit."

"Why should he find out—he didn't about the others."

"What others?"

"Don't try to fool me I've been the first, Alice."

"All right—you haven't."

"You brazen little thing."

"What about you—never seen a woman before, I suppose?"

"Never seen one like you, me dear."

"Kiss me, Harry—you say nice things, sometimes."

"But there aren't going to be any others now, so don't kid yourself."

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"Strong man, aren't you?"

"Strong enough for you, my darling," Small said, his lips pressed against the soft white flesh where neck and bosom join.

"So you are," she answered, and whispered something in his ear, and the two of them laughed together, close in one another's arms on the chair in front of the fire.

Nature must have clapped her hands with delight when these two came together; they were perfectly matched, fine in body, passionate in spirit, each completely unscrupulous where pleasure was to be had.

Small disentangled himself from the woman's arms and lit a cigarette.

"What about old Burdett?" he asked. "Anything new?"

"No. Jimmy seems pretty busy about it."

"He ought to have caught the chap red-handed whoever it was, that would have been one up for him."

"He was out this side that evening."

"Who says so?"

"He did—after poachers."

"Well, he might as well have been elsewhere; they were out in the Big Wood on Monday. What's this Inspector chap like?"

"A bit funny, but quite nice, a proper gentleman."

"I suppose you'll be after him next."

"I don't go after people."

"You take damn good care to let 'em come after you, you little bitch."

"Shut up, Harry."

Small laughed and slid his arm round her again. She caught her breath for an instant as his great hand closed possessively over her breast.

"Funny thing we were in these parts so long before finding out about one another," he said.

"Finding out what?"

"About us being—willing."

"Who says I'm willing?"

Small took the stupid question off her lips with a kiss.

"I had to be awfully careful," she said, "because of Jimmy; you don't know how jealous he is."

"He'd be jealous now if he could see this."

"My God, he'd kill you."

Small laughed. "Would he?"

"Or me."

"Is it worth the risk?"

"I don't know that it is."

"Little devil. Here, come back and be comfy like we were, you're as jumpy as a squirrel."

"I must go soon, Harry; he knows I never stay very late at my sister's."

"He might find out you didn't go there."

"Don't be silly. I'm not such a fool as that. I did go there; he isn't likely to ask exactly what time I left, and I can always say I took a long time over coming home—he'd believe me."

"My God, you haven't half got that chap on a string, Alice."

The woman laughed in unaffected delight.

"Why not? He gets a square deal out of it. I never worry where he's been off to. 'Tisn't my fault if he's fool enough not to go anywhere."

"Pretty fond of you, isn't he?"

"He absolutely adores me. I can give him hell if I want to, by getting in a temper and not letting him near me."

"Don't start any of them tricks here, or you'll be getting something you didn't reckon for."

"Maybe I want something I did reckon for." Again she whispered in his ear, and they both laughed together, two lovers wrapt up in the imagined security of their own passion, away from all the interruptions and idiocies of an unimportant world.

She broke away with one of her abrupt movements.

"I really must go, Harry, 'tisn't safe to be longer."

"What about to-morrow?"

"Where? Here?"

"No. That old fool of a woman comes up to clean the place out to-morrow; if I put her off she'll only

talk. Won't you be walking the Big Wood way?"

"It might rain."

"It won't, I can tell you that. The weather's turned with the moon. 'Bout three o'clock to-morrow I'll have finished my traps and be where the clearing is."

"I may not be able to come."

Small stretched himself and laughed.

"I expect ye will," he said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

INSPECTOR KINGSLEY HYLTON was off to Morechester early next morning; he hired a car from the Hoops, with the rather annoying result that he was on the steps of the Luxor Hairdressing Saloon before that establishment had opened for the day. A prolonged study of the impossibly perfect coiffure of a waxen lady grinning fixedly in the window seemed only to whet his impatience. At length the crimson-nailed, thin-voiced Miss Neve turned up, a little flustered to find somebody waiting for her; still more flustered when Hylton produced his card and announced his identity.

"What I want to know," he demanded once they were inside, "is who it was who had her hair done here at 2.30 last Monday."

Miss Neve said, in tones approaching the reverential, that she would Look at The Book.

She Looked at The Book.

"Well, it was booked for Mrs. Reeves of Ferney House."

"I know; somebody told us that already; but Mrs. Reeves changed with someone, didn't she?"

"As a matter of fact, she did. Really, Inspector, the way these people ring up and expect you to

alter everything at the last minute just to suit themselves, is awful."

"I dare say. Whom did Mrs. Reeves change with?"

"It would be Miss Young who told you about it being Mrs. Reeves; she just looked at the book, of course, and she had nothing to with the alteration, I did that myself. Of course I always take customers like Mrs. Reeves in person."

"No doubt. And who took Mrs. Reeves' place on Monday?"

"Why, it was Mrs. Fenton of Fenton's Stores in Enderton."

"Mrs. Fenton? You're sure?"

"Oh yes, *quite* sure. I remember thinking how lucky it was Mrs. Fenton coming in to book a time, just after Mrs. Reeves had rung up, I mean. I saw her myself and gave her an appointment card."

"Mrs. Reeves didn't have an appointment card as well, did she, when she originally booked that time, I mean?"

"Oh, *no*. Mrs. Reeves always does all her booking and everything by telephone. Of course, when they rang up from the Police the other day to ask about it Miss Young just Looked at The Book and told them what was down there; if I'd——"

Hylton nodded. He was too sadly used to getting inaccurate information to let it worry him much, so long as it came right in the end.

"Quite so, Miss Neve," he said cheerfully. "Well, we seem to have got it right now, anyway.

Many thanks. You needn't tell anyone about this, it would be distinctly better not to, in fact."

Miss Neve looked pained. " Oh, I shan't say a *word* to a*nybody*," she said.

" Liar," thought Hylton as he took his leave.

" Back to Enderton, and step on it," were his instructions as he jumped into the waiting car.

The driver, nothing loath, duly stepped on it, with the result, as Hylton had the curiosity to note, that they were back at the Hoops exactly twelve minutes after leaving Morechester.

A busy twelve minutes for the Inspector's cat-like brain. . . . Mrs. Fenton? Quite certainly he had not expected to have her brought into the business . . . and yet there came back to his mind the odd little scene in Fenton's Stores when he had overheard enough to tell him that John Fenton's wife should have been in church at half-past seven on Monday evening and, evidently to her husband's surprise, wasn't. . . . Kingsley Hylton smiled. The more you see of human nature the less you know about it, he reflected . . . probably going to learn a bit more to-day. He would have been astonished could he have foreseen what a startling series of lessons he was about to have. . . .

Ping!

A great deal of business was done in Fenton's Stores on Saturday, and though John and his wife knew they would be thoroughly tired out when evening came, yet they both enjoyed the bustle and activity of the crowded morning. The busy

time had hardly started yet, and Hylton was the only customer in the shop. John Fenton turned from arranging some packets of sugar to serve him; his eyes took an uneasy look when he saw who had come in.

" Anything I can do for you, sir? " he asked. " Tobacco, matches, or anything? "

" I want a word with you, Mr. Fenton."

" With—with me, sir? "

" Yes; in the back room will be best, won't it? "

" Just as you like, sir."

Hylton followed the storekeeper into the small living-room at the back, so absolutely perfect in the unhygienic hideousness of its smug Victorianism that one felt it could have been matched only by a deliberately, and rather cruelly, designed stage-set.

However, Hylton's mind was too much keyed up to appreciate the full flavour of antimacassars, symmetrically disposed bronzes of ramping horses, waxen flowers under inverted glass jars, and ultra life-size enlargements of photographs.

" Mrs. Fenton in? " he asked.

John Fenton hesitated. If ever a man's expression pleaded for life not to badger him any further his did at that moment. " Well, sir, I suppose she's somewhere round at the back," he said at length.

" Ask her to step in, would you? "

Fenton went to the door, poked his head into the passage and called, " Mother."

Mary Fenton was busy in the kitchen, getting

as much of her cooking done as she could before the rush of work started.

" Coming, John," she called in the very words and tone with which she had answered him for thirty years. The rustle of her black dress could be heard in the passage, and she entered the living-room. Her eyes went at once to the Inspector and all the colour drained from her face.

John Fenton crossed over to her and he took her hand, patting it kindly. " Now, Mother, don't take on," he begged. " This gentleman wants to ask us a few questions, I expect."

" I do, though I hadn't said so," Hylton smiled.

" Sit down, Mrs. Fenton, and make yourself comfortable. There's nothing to be frightened about, if you'll just tell me one or two things."

Mary Fenton sank into one of the worn, red-plush chairs and nodded.

" What was it you were wanting to know, sir? " John asked, taking his stand by his wife's chair.

" Not a great deal. Did Mrs. Fenton have her hair done in the Luxor Saloon in Morechester last Monday afternoon? "

" Yes, I did, sir," Mary answered.

" Good. And did you have an appointment card to remind you of the time you were to go there? "

" Oh, yes, they always give you that when you book the time."

Hylton produced his note-book. " Is this the card? "

"Where are my glasses, John dear?"

John knew where her glasses were, he should have done if habit counts for anything. Mary put them on with fingers that could not help trembling, and John heartened her with his hand on one shoulder. Suddenly Hylton, watching the pair of them, so much dependent on one another, so little equipped to meet any of the brutalities of life, experienced one of the worst moments of his whole career. "I hope to God they aren't mixed up in it" was his unspoken thought.

"That's better," Mary said, inspecting the appointment card once more. "Yes, I suppose this is it; it says Monday at 2.30, doesn't it?"

"Now, Mrs. Fenton, that card was found outside one of the windows at Enderton Court—how did it get there?"

"*Oh!*"

John went on his knees by his wife and patted her hand. "Come, Mary, come," he begged, "it's all right, it's all right, they can't do anything to you."

Mary Fenton grasped John's comforting hand with her own and gave him a quick little smile of reassurance; when she spoke it was in a controlled and purposeful voice.

"Mr. Burdett was a hard man, sir. He never thought of anything but money; well, I suppose we all think about that and about getting on and doing well for ourselves, but he never thought about anything else."

Hylton nodded. " Go on."

" John, you tell the gentleman about the shop and all."

The Inspector listened to the history of Fenton's Stores—a dream of thirty years' duration, a story of five minutes' telling.

" That was how it stood, sir. Mr. Burdett wouldn't listen to anything but the money; and it wasn't as though he needed it all that badly. I told him it meant the end of Fenton's Stores if he let 5 and 7 to the Coastal people, and he didn't care if it did—as good as told me so."

" That's what I couldn't stand," Mary broke in, " when I saw him that Monday morning in the Square—we were just seeing Mr. Steeble out of the shop—I saw him with those old clothes of his and that awful smile, and I thought: there's a human being, just like one of us, only he's never had to fight to live, and he's got it in his power to squash us absolutely, all our happiness and our home and everything we've got. And I thought: 'It isn't right of God to let things be like that.' Oh, I felt awful about it."

" My dear, my dear."

" It's all right now, John, I can tell the gentleman everything now, I feel better about it all. Well, sir, I thought about the thing all day Monday. Of course it was pretty terrible for us, like John has tried to tell you. And after a bit I began to think perhaps it couldn't really be so bad; you know how your mind will turn to the bright side of things. I thought

surely Mr. Burdett couldn't do what he threatened if he really understood what it meant, and that we were willing to try to meet him about the rent and everything. John wouldn't go and see him any more, he said he had done his best and it was no good; so I suddenly thought I'd go up to the Court myself. I've often found, if you'll excuse me, sir, that a woman has to do things herself to get them done"—she stretched out a hand and patted John's to soften this blow to his masculine pride. "Of course I knew John would never agree to my going, so I just had to make up my mind to go without. On Monday Mr. Steeble always has a women's service at a quarter to eight, so I set off as usual at half-past seven, and of course John thought he knew where I was going; but I never went near St. Leonard's, I went straight up to the Court. I went up the back way because that's the nearest for us——"

"What time did you get there, Mrs. Fenton?"

"It was eight o'clock, sir, as I rang the bell; I heard St. Leonard's strike, and I thought what Mr. Steeble would be thinking about me not being there."

"What happened when you rang the bell?"

"Nothing, sir. I rang and rang and nobody came. I knew it was Mr. Lumsdale's day out—I suppose we all get to know one another's business in a little place like this—and I thought that perhaps the bell didn't ring, or old Mr. Burdett might not be able to hear it. Well, I wasn't going to be beaten, sir; I'd made up my mind that I *had* to see him, and I walked round to the side of the house. There was a light showing

in a window—I suppose that would be the room where he used to sit. Knowing what he was, I thought the light would never be burning unless he was there, so I thought I'd tap the pane and attract his attention that way."

"And did you?"

"No, sir, I got right up to the window just going to tap it, and there was a bit of a crack between the curtains and I could see right into the room——"

"Well?" Hylton prompted gently.

"Well, sir, I saw him dead, across the table, and his head all—all like it was; only a foot or two away it seemed."

"You never went into the house?"

"That I didn't, sir; nothing would have got me in after what I saw, I give you my word. I nearly fainted as it was. I was so upset I dropped my bag outside the window and had a business to get it again. I was particular careful when I got back here to see if I had lost anything, but I never thought of that appointment card."

"Why didn't you tell somebody about it, Mrs. Fenton?"

"Well, sir, I was very upset in the first place about going to speak to Mr. Burdett without a word to Mr. Fenton, and then what I saw there put me out altogether, as I think you will understand. I was that flustered by it all, worrying whether I would get mixed up in it and not wanting Mr. Fenton to know I had ever been, that when I got back here I told him I had a bit of a headache and went off to bed. Next

morning, of course, it was all over the village, and I thought I'd do best by not saying anything."

Hylton nodded. He was so genuinely relieved to find that this dear old couple were not criminally involved in the affair that he forbore from rubbing into them the stupidity, and worse than stupidity, of not being perfectly honest with the forces of the law.

"But oh, Mr. Inspector," poor Mary went on, now dissolving into tears, "I've had such a time worrying about it, and wondering what to do for the best, that I've nearly been out of my mind. I told John all about it the other day, and now I've told you, and thank God for it."

Hylton rose to go; he didn't think there would be any more fish to catch in this pool.

"Now, Mrs. Fenton," he said kindly but quite firmly, "you were very foolish not to go straight away to the Sergeant and tell him all you've told me——"

"I'm sure I was, sure, sir," Mary sobbed.

"But better late than never, so don't worry any more——"

"It's all right then, sir, is it? I shan't be taken for being an accessory after the fact or whatever they call it, shall I?"

"Good Lord, no. The law's here to help law-abiding people like you, you know. One thing I do want you to help me in though——"

"What's that, sir? I'm sure I'll do anything I can."

"You're quite sure about the time when you rang the bell at the Court?"

"Oh, I'm sure of that, sir. I heard St. Leonard's striking the hour as plain as plain, and I thought I ought to be sitting in church listening to Mr. Steeble instead of being where I was. Oh, I'm sure of that."

"Right. Now, not a word about this to anybody else and——"

Ping!

"——and there's someone in the shop," Hylton concluded with a kindly smile, "so just let me out the back way and don't worry."

The Inspector walked straight from Fenton's Stores as fast as his long legs would take him towards Fielden Cottage, thinking furiously all the time. He did not grudge the time spent in listening to Mary Fenton's somewhat verbose explanation, for one vitally important fact had been established by it. Arthur Burdett was dead at eight o'clock. Lumsdale certainly had not left Morechester until 7.45 and he had no car. Even if he had managed, after a minute or two of waiting, to get a lift there was still the walk up from the main road to be considered. It was almost out of the bounds of possibility for him to get the lift, walk up to the Court, and do the murder all in fifteen minutes. No one knew better than Hylton how many crimes are solved by the process of elimination, and, with Lumsdale almost certainly out of the running, he looked forward with added interest to his chat with Mr. Dale Shipley.

The door was opened a foot or so by Mrs. Somers, who, when she saw who the visitor was, showed no inclination to increase the aperture.

"Mr. Shipley in?" he asked.
"No, he isn't in."
"Will he be long before he's back?"
"I couldn't say."
"Do you know where he's gone?"
"I can't say that I do."
"What time did he go out?"
"Well—I——" The faithful Mrs. Somers seemed nonplussed by the simple question, and looking at her defensive countenance, a wild inspiration, such as had saved him more than once before, came to Kingsley Hylton.

"I suppose he slept last night here, didn't he?" he asked.

Mrs. Somers turned brick red. "I never said he didn't," she stammered, "and I'm sure I can't spend all my time here answering impertinent questions."

"*No, you don't.*" Hylton frustrated her determined effort to slam the door in his face by a lightning-like forward movement of his foot. Mrs. Somers tried to protest, but she was too flustered and frightened and generally put about to be effectual. The Inspector forced his way into the hall.

"Now look here, Mrs. Somers," he said in a tone of voice he did not often use towards women, "you're acting like a fool. You know who I am and what business I'm here on. If you won't talk to me here I shall have you taken to Morechester Police Station and we'll keep you there until you do talk; so make up your mind."

The embarrassed and indignant red of Mrs.

Somers' countenance had suddenly given way to dead white, and Hylton, watching her closely, knew there would be no need to worry Morechester.

"What is it you want to know?" she asked woodenly.

"I want to know whether Mr. Shipley spent last night here, and everything you know about his whereabouts."

"I've no idea where he is."

"But you know something," Hylton said brutally, "and you'll tell it me—now."

"Mr. Shipley went off yesterday evening."

"Went off?" Hylton was on the words like a ferret. "Where to?"

"I tell you I don't know."

"Tell me what you do know, Mrs. Somers, and quickly please."

"About six o'clock yesterday evening, it was, Mr. Shipley came downstairs with the small suitcase of his, and said he was going up to London for a bit and didn't know when he'd be back. That's all I know."

Hylton almost gasped his delight as he stared at his reluctant informer. . . . *All* she knew, as though it weren't enough and more than enough. . . . Young Shipley had bolted, always the most foolish and desperate thing a criminal can do. . . . Hylton's brain was working like a fury . . . ring up White, ring up Morechester, ring up the railway station, ring up Scotland Yard, get a photograph from somewhere and circularize a description in the *Police News* and

to every station in England, clap this dangerously loyal woman under lock and key until the whole thing was over, get hold of——

"*Inspector Hylton.*"

He wheeled round surprised.

Nancy Featherstone, in her best tweed coat and skirt, was standing at the open front door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"HALLO, Miss Featherstone."

"Good morning."

Nancy looked the picture of calm collectedness, but appearances are apt to be deceptive sometimes, especially in unmarried women of forty.

"I was looking for you, Inspector Hylton."

"For me?"

"Yes, I wanted a word with you, please."

"Right-oh. There's a telephone call I want to make first, but it——"

"I think perhaps you better hear what I've got to say first——"

Hylton glanced at her sharply.

"All right, Miss Featherstone."

"If we could have a minute or two together."

Mrs. Somers turned brick red once again, partly from virtuous indignation at the implied suggestion that she would even dream of listening to other people's business, partly from disappointment.

Hylton stepped out on to the gravel drive, and Nancy silently led him a dozen paces or so from the door, then she turned and faced him.

"I couldn't help hearing a certain amount of what

you were saying to Mrs. Somers," she said. "Apparently you are looking for Mr. Shipley."

"I am."

"You needn't look far, Inspector, he's at my house."

"At your house?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact he—he spent last night there," Nancy said calmly and not without a slight note of triumph.

Kingsley Hylton looked at her a trifle flabbergasted.

"What—all night?" he asked rather foolishly.

Nancy nodded. "Yes, all night."

Hylton actually blushed; he certainly had no desire to pry into the affairs of Enderton except in so far as they concerned his business.

"Well, I should certainly like a word with Mr. Shipley," he said.

"You can come down and see him now, can't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I can. He's still there, then?"

"Oh, yes, rather. You didn't think he would run away, did you?" Nancy asked, smiling.

"Er—well—I——"

"Won't you walk down with me now, Inspector?"

"Yes, I rather think I will."

Conversation flagged on that half-mile walk. Though Hylton kept assuring himself that other people's intrigues were no possible concern or interest of his, he actually began to feel acutely embarrassed and was intensely relieved when half-way down

Pilcher's Lane they turned into a drive gateway and made their way to a solidly built square house standing well back amid evergreens and trees.

Nancy produced a key from her bag and opened the front door. " My maid's out for the day," she said, " so will you let me get you a glass of sherry or something? "

" It's very kind of you, Miss Featherstone, but I won't bother you, thanks; all I want to do is to have a word with Mr. Shipley."

They were in the hall now, at the foot of the stairs, and Nancy hesitated. She stood there, saying nothing, doing nothing except eyeing the Inspector in a curiously speculative way.

" If I could just see Mr. Shipley," he insisted gently, " I wouldn't have to trouble you any——"

" Of course," she said, coming to life with a sudden snap. " But it's a little awkward; you see, I'm afraid he isn't quite sober at the moment."

" Er—oh—I—um."

" But perhaps he's well enough now for you to see him and ask some questions—you want to do that, don't you? "

" Yes, I do."

Nancy nodded brightly. " Come along, then," she said, " and we'll see how he is."

Kingsley Hylton followed her upstairs, turning over in his mind the old, old truth that queer though nature may be in parts, there's " nowt as queer as folk." A theory was already beginning to form in his mind to put the morning's unexpected events in

order: young Shipley feels he must get his trouble off his chest to somebody; he goes down to Nancy Featherstone and keeps her up half the night with a rambling, rigmarole tale, half confession, half bravado; at the end of it he empties her whisky decanter, and with the incredible patience and loyalty of a woman, she puts him to bed and generally looks after him. Possible, of course (he reflected), but in that case why the suit-case—if he didn't mean to run away, why should he have packed? Did Nancy Featherstone have the sense to save him from what would have been the last disastrous folly? Well, we'll soon find out, the Inspector thought.

Nancy had been leading him along a corridor off the main landing, and now halted opposite a door half-way down it. She stood to one side.

" If you wouldn't mind going in there," she said, " and seeing what you can do with him, I'll be downstairs whenever you want me."

Hylton smiled at her. " Right-oh, Miss Featherstone, thank you very much. I don't suppose we shall worry you any more."

She answered his smile and opened the door for him, and Kingsley Hylton, full of curiosity, went into the room.

He found himself in a small compartment with a faintly musty smell about it; it was in semi-darkness, being lighted only by a narrow slit of a window very high up. Over in the far corner was something that might be a bed, but which, when he walked over to

inspect it, turned out to be an old-fashioned ottoman with some apparently discarded clothes on it. Except for this uninteresting item the room was empty, and Hylton, slightly surprised, went back to the door to seek Miss Featherstone's advice.

The door proved difficult to open and Hylton called out cheerfully, " I say, Miss Featherstone."

" Hallo."

" Give the door a push, would you? It's got stuck or something."

" No, it isn't stuck—I've locked it."

Fifteen seconds of silence followed this remarkable declaration; fifteen seconds during which a positive flood of uncomfortable and revealing realizations surged into Kingsley Hylton's astonished brain.

" You've—er—locked it? " he asked at length.

" Yes. The key's in the lock now, on the outside, here."

Another pause occurred.

" Are you playing some sort of a game, Miss Featherstone? " Hylton asked. " What's all this about, and where is Dale Shipley? "

" I haven't any idea where he is," a voice explained apologetically, " and that's why I had to do it. It was the only way I could think of to stop you telephoning, and all that."

It isn't pleasant for any man to realize that someone has made an utter and complete fool of him, and it says a good deal for Kingsley Hylton that he didn't fly into a temper; he had the sense to spare himself that futile and humiliating exhibition; but

he couldn't resist a determined rattling and pulling at the door handle.

" Look here, Miss Featherstone," he said, when he realized the stupidity of what he was doing, " I do beg of you to be sensible. You must know that you are acting in a very foolish way and one that will get you into trouble, serious trouble——"

" Oh, yes, I realize all that, thank you."

" Well please have the sense to end it now, and I'll not say anything about it."

" It's a very sporting offer, but I couldn't possibly think of it."

" Miss Featherstone——"

" Hallo? "

" I'm bound to warn you how really serious this may be."

" Yes, of course you are."

" I'm sure you don't realize——"

" Oh, I do truly—please don't worry yourself about that. I'm frightfully sorry to have to do it."

" For God's sake, woman, have the sense to unlock that door and put an end to this damned idiocy. You can't know what you're letting yourself in for."

" Yes, I do—accessory after the fact, isn't it? "

Hylton didn't answer . . . *accessory after the fact* . . . what fact? He wondered how much she knew. . . . Shipley had told her, of course, and bolted, and she had hatched up this plot to help him. . . . And, by God, Hylton swore in sudden realization, it would help the fellow, too. If he had the sense to make straight for the Continent, a day's delay in getting

out his description and warning all the ports might easily mean losing him. A sudden access of impotent temper made him rattle the door handle vigorously.

" *Miss Featherstone.*"

No reply.

" *Miss Featherstone.*"

" Yes."

" In the name of the law I ask you to open this door at once and let me out."

A pause; then, " Inspector Hylton——"

" Hallo? Yes? "

" Will you please listen to me for a minute? "

" Yes, of course, what is it? "

" I'm frightfully sorry that you are going to be inconvenienced, but I'm not going to open that door for quite a time yet."

" You're not? "

" No. Of course you can shout if you want to; but I honestly don't think it will be much good; you see, I'm all alone in the house until ten o'clock tonight and there isn't another house within a quarter of a mile; I'm going down now to send the groom off on an all-day trip. I'm only telling you all this to save you tiring yourself out unnecessarily."

" It's very good of you."

Another pause. Indeed Hylton was finding himself rather stumped for suitable conversation. After a bit he said:

" Miss Featherstone, are you still there? "

" Yes."

"Why are you acting in this absolutely insane way?"

It is not easy for an atmosphere of dramatic intensity to be established between two people separated by half an inch of solid oak, but somehow it sprang up between those two at that moment.

"Why are you acting in this absolutely insane way?"

"Do you think I want to? Because I had to, *I had to.* He must have a chance; I couldn't let you get him like that—like a pack of hounds."

That was the last time Hylton was to hear Nancy Featherstone's voice for several hours. When he realized that she was no longer outside the door, he began to take calmer stock of the situation. In a way it had its ludicrous side, and it says a good deal for Kingsley Hylton's temperament that he could view it philosophically.

He first of all examined his material surroundings. The room he was in had originally been designed as a sort of primitive strong-room in the old days when farmers knew nothing of banks; subsequently it had been used as an apple store and a linen room, and now, under Nancy Featherstone's regime, it had almost passed out of regular use altogether.

He found that he could drag the cumbersome ottoman about, and that by standing on it he could just see out of the narrow window—a slit some twelve inches by five. He had a splendid view of three horses grazing half a mile away on the other side of the valley. The walls seemed pretty solid when

he sounded them (they were nine-inch, brick-built, workmanlike jobs), and the door, which (as he reflected) he would have splintered with his strong right shoulder in any decently directed film, might have yielded to an hour's hard work with a crow-bar, but was a hopeless task to attempt with bare hands.

Hylton realized that for all practical purposes he was a prisoner until Nancy chose to let him out, and the thought sobered and even, in a way, amused him.

Looking back on the events of the past twenty minutes he honestly could not allow that he was to blame. No woman in her senses would have acted as Nancy Featherstone had; and no one could have looked more completely in her senses, the sane and sober collected mistress of herself, than she had done. . . .

Turning his mind to what would come of it he felt unhappy. Dale Shipley had done the murder, of so much he now felt certain. . . . How long dare the woman keep him locked up there? Twelve hours? twenty-four, possibly? . . . Even if it were only twelve and Shipley acted with decision it might give him all the start he wanted. . . . Hylton swore audibly. What a darned fool he would look when he got back to the Yard. . . . And there was Nancy Featherstone herself to consider. If Shipley were wanted for murder, her act of insane infatuation would land her into very nasty trouble. . . . Kingsley Hylton sighed, drew one of

his thin black cigars out, lit it, took a pencil from his note-book and devoted himself to drawing chess problems on the conveniently bare and distempered wall.

. . . . . .

Nancy Featherstone went straight downstairs to the stable and sent the mildly astonished groom on a footling and complicated errand well the other side of Morechester. When she had seen him safely off the premises she went into the drawing-room and sat in front of the fire thinking. Like the man upstairs, she, too, reviewed the events which had brought her to the present extraordinary situation. Twenty-four hours before, if anyone had told her that she would be sitting in her house with an Inspector from Scotland Yard a prisoner upstairs and herself in obvious and real danger of the law, she would certainly have thought them mad; yet, looking back on how things had happened, she, too, could hardly see how she could have acted otherwise.

She drew from her handbag a letter. It had come to her by the first post that morning, one of the very few that Dale Shipley had ever written to her; but she knew the handwriting well, and had been surprised to notice a London postmark on the stamp.

That postmark had frightened her. Somehow it had brought to life a whole lot of dormant fears which had been slumbering at the back of her mind, too unpleasant to be pulled out into the open

and honestly examined. With a growing conviction that there was bad news in it, she had drawn out the letter and read it.

Now, for the tenth time, she drew it out and read it again.

It was written on cheap paper, bearing neither date nor address.

"*Dear Nancy,—You won't see me for dinner tonight*" (they had arranged to dine together, a fact which for twenty-four hours had coloured Nancy's life with happiness and expectation). "*I've had to get away in a hurry. I dare say people will soon be saying nasty things about me, but I can't help that. Dale.*"

As soon as she had read that, doubts blazed to conviction in her mind and she had become absolutely cold with a sick fear. . . . *Dale had done it.* . . . Half a dozen uncomfortable little whispers suddenly roared into an unendurable shouting in her head . . . his coming late to the Reeves' on the night of the murder; his quarrel with the murdered man a few days earlier; his anxiety that she shouldn't tell anyone; above all, that moment at Fielden Cottage when Lawson from the Court lodge had been announced and Dale had gone suddenly white . . . and, somehow, she knew (and now realized that she had known all along) that it was just the sort of thing that Dale would do, with his hot temper and his sulkiness and his boyish irresponsibility—a sudden flare-up of angry words, a blow and—*oh, my God.* . . . Her vivid imagination

brought the whole scene to her and she felt ill with horror; and then another scene supplanted it: a crowded court room, a bullying, brutal, merciless counsel, twelve stupid faces, and in the middle of it all, looking this way and that, like an animal in a trap, running a dry tongue over drier lips, the white, scared countenance of Dale, and over him, like an evil shadow, the vision of a noosed rope.

Nancy had had no breakfast; she would have been sick if she had attempted to eat a particle of food. At half-past eight her groom had sent a message from the kitchen to know whether to get the grey ready for hunting.

Nancy shook her head; she had conceived a sudden sympathy for hunted things . . . Dale in London now, no money, no friends, hurrying through mean streets, afraid of every policeman he slunk past. . . .

" Please, will it make any difference to my day out? " Annie, her general servant, had inquired apprehensively.

" No, no; you can go out, Annie."

" Thank you, I'm sure, madam. I hope you're feeling all right——"

" Yes, I'm all right. Go out just as we arranged, please. . . ."

At half-past ten she could not stand being alone in the house any longer; she was eaten up with anxiety to find out whether they knew in the village about Dale; if they didn't yet, they soon would; she realized that was inevitable. Although she

knew that it would do no good, she felt that she must go up to Fielden Cottage and speak about Dale to Mrs. Somers.

When she got there the front door was open and Mrs. Somers was already in conversation with someone. As soon as Nancy saw who it was she felt sick with reawakened fear . . . the detective from Scotland Yard . . . they were after him already, then . . . she overheard half a dozen quick questions and answers and realized that Hylton himself was just learning about Dale. There and then, without the slightest idea how it could be accomplished, she realized that she must help Dale by delaying his pursuers.

When Nancy called out " Inspector Hylton " she actually did not know what her next sentence was going to be; by the time he had swung round and greeted her the fantastic story about Dale having spent the night with her was already running easily and convincingly in her head.

At any rate it saved the situation for the minute and stopped the detective telephoning; it gave her time to think things out, and as she walked back with Kingsley Hylton to her own house she thought things out to some tune.

That she was running a risk in the matter and putting herself into very serious danger never even entered her head; one fact stood out as being self-evident and supremely important: Dale must be given a chance to get away. If she could only give him a whole day's start she realized it would be

something—it might be everything. . . . If she could somehow keep this Kingsley Hylton man for a day away from Sergeant White, away from the telephone. . . . It was not until they were turning into her drive gates that the thought of the old strong-room, now practically deserted, came to her, and with it came crowding other confirmatory items: Annie was out for the day; she could easily send the groom away on some pretext; she could ring up the three tradesmen who would be sending errand boys and tell them that if she wanted anything she would call in her car. So much was simple—but how to get the man upstairs unsuspecting?

They were in the hall now, and to gain time she offered Hylton a glass of sherry. The fool refused. "If I could see Mr. Shipley——" he insisted, and the words brought inspiration to Nancy. The brilliant idea about Dale being drunk came to her; somehow it seemed in keeping with the whole situation, and though the Inspector had seemed a trifle staggered he had followed her up the stairs easily enough and had most obligingly preceded her into the lumber-room. . . .

Sitting in front of the fire in the drawing-room thus thinking over the events of that extraordinary morning, she actually laughed; but it was a laugh without much mirth in it. . . . Tragic fools, she thought, mankind must be to blunder into the messes that they get into. . . . Dale was just the sort of headstrong fool, of course, who would get caught up in the fatal and fantastically simple business of

murder . . . and she was a fool seven times greater to be enmeshed in this extraordinary situation when she ought to be out hunting on the grey in the winter sunshine, with the day running peacefully by in its normal way. . . .

She picked up Dale's letter, read it through slowly once again and tossed it on to the fire. When it was burnt she broke the ashes up savagely with the poker.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At one o'clock Sergeant White came back to his cottage and went thoughtfully through into the kitchen where his wife was busy taking something out of the oven.

"How's Mr. Hylton this morning?" Alice asked lightly.

"He wasn't there."

"Not there? Where was he?"

"As a matter of fact I don't quite know. He told me to meet him at twelve and said particularly I was not to be late. They told me at the Hoops that he went into Morechester this morning early, and then came back about half-past ten, and they haven't seen him since."

"*Damn and blast.*" Alice let the unexpectedly hot plate clatter to the ground and sucked the burnt tip of her finger ruefully.

"I wish you wouldn't swear like that, Alice," James White said, and his handsome wife made a grimace. Jimmy was always pulling her up for swearing or smoking and drinking. . . . Bit of a Puritan in his queer way, though God knows, she thought amusedly, he likes some things well enough. She wondered what sort of a scene he would make if he guessed the truth about her. This morning the

oven was behaving stupidly and the shepherd's pie was burnt, and just because she was in a hurry to get out after dinner all things were conspiring against her.

"Pity you can't find out who did that old fool in," she said irritably; "we might get a lift then and be able to afford a decent oven."

"No one can expect me to be over at Nyeton and at Enderton Court at the same time."

"It wasn't much good your being at Nyeton seemingly, the poachers were out just the same."

"How do you know that?" White asked quickly, and Alice could have bitten the end of her stupid tongue off. . . . She ought to have learned by now, she reflected, to be doubly careful with a man as madly jealous as her husband.

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"I just heard somebody talking about it somewhere in the village. Here, have this damned—oh, I'm sorry, Jimmy, this blessed shepherd's pie before it gets cold. . . ."

She cut him a piece of bread and put the bottle of Yorkshire relish in his reach and filled his glass with water. All these ministrations he received with that masculine matter-of-course indifference which not infrequently a woman finds the most maddening thing in the whole world. One or two sharp comments came to her tongue, but she repressed them. . . . Jimmy had a regular job with good money and a pension; she wasn't going to be fool enough to fall out with him unnecessarily, especially when she

could pull the wool over his eyes so beautifully as long as she was careful.

"Pie's burnt a bit," he said. "What are you doing this afternoon?"

"Going to Morechester."

"The pictures, I suppose?"

"Well, what's wrong with the pictures?"

White seemed to indicate, by a contemptuous nod of his head, that in his opinion there was a great deal wrong with the pictures.

"You're always off there, nowadays," he said.

"A woman wants to get out of her house sometime, I suppose."

"What's on—anything special?"

For a moment Alice could hardly believe her ears; not once in three months did her husband express the slightest interest in the cinema . . . it would be just like the almost inspired perverseness of the male, she thought, if he said he would come with her. He noticed her slight pause and asked again, this time looking full at her.

"I'm just trying to think," she said testily; "I can't carry all the programmes in my head. I'm not sure what it is, but I don't think it's anything special."

After a moment or so she could not help adding, "Were you thinking of coming, Jimmy?"

"Good Lord, no. I've got something to do. I shall be out with the Inspector on this Court case, I suppose."

Alice was well pleased to let the conversation run on to other lines.

"Funny you can't get any idea who's done it," she said.

"Who says we can't get any idea? I keep telling the Inspector it's most likely one of these rough-looking chaps I saw in the village a day or two before."

"I wonder who they were. Nobody else saw them, did they?"

"Of course somebody else saw them, but nobody takes any notice of a tramp."

"Seems to me a waste of time looking in the village here."

"P'r'aps they'll find that out as they go along," White said with a peculiar smile.

His wife watched him narrowly; she was well aware that when James White married her he was marrying beneath himself. She was not his class, nor had she got his mental outlook and background. She knew that there was always a good deal of her husband that lay beyond her reach altogether—sometimes she was puzzled to know how much it was, and just what went on in that part of his brain she never touched.

"What's up?" he demanded explosively.

"Nothing." She laughed at the very violence of his question. "I suppose I can't even look at you, now."

"I thought you were looking queerly," he mumbled, turning away.

"Will the Inspector be coming here this afternoon?"

"Probably later on. He seems to like a game of chess, though he hasn't beaten me yet. I suppose I shall have to hang about the Hoops till he turns up."

"Do you think he suspects young Shipley?"

"Why should he?" Her husband looked up sharply.

"Well, everybody knows he didn't like the old man, and I suppose it might as well be him as anybody else."

White looked away again and shook his head.

"I don't think it was Dale Shipley," he said, "so don't you get jumping to the conclusion it was."

Alice gave her rich, carefree laugh. "I don't care who it was," she cried, "as long as it wasn't you."

"Don't talk foolishly," James White begged in a grumbling voice.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

At half-past two exactly Harry Small sat on the bole of a fallen oak facing the central clearing in the Big Wood, laid his gun carefully on the dry ground at his side, and pulling an old pouch out of one capacious side pocket began to fill the pipe that he had been sucking.

When it was lit he puffed out little clouds of blue smoke and looked down the ride in front of him contentedly. He had had a good round with his traps, his work was well advanced, the sun was as strong as if it had been April instead of January, and he was looking forward to his afternoon.

The world seemed good to Harry Small and he saw no reason to grumble at it. As he sat there perfectly still, except for the slight movements of his lips when he let each cloud of smoke escape, the wild life whose activities his arrival had interrupted began to resume its normal trafficking again. The long, sinuous form of a stoat crept out, not ten yards away, and without so much as a glance at him the brave and bloodthirsty little animal went lolloping off among the undergrowth on his secret and furtive business. When he first saw the stoat the gamekeeper's hand almost made an instinctive movement towards his gun, but he checked it. For once he let

the vermin go. He was feeling in a rare mood of lazy contentment, and on the whole, he reflected pleasantly, stoats and their like didn't get much change out of Harry Small.

A minute later, half-way down the ride, a big dog-fox came out of the bramble bushes and paused for a moment, questing muzzle and one fore paw uplifted; then he trotted easily away and was lost in the briars on the other side. Small grinned; he knew what the old fox was after, and he wished him luck and merry sport with his vixen on that sunny afternoon.

He glanced at his watch; Alice was ten minutes late, but Small didn't worry; she'd come . . . having trouble with that husband of hers most likely. The gamekeeper smiled as his thoughts ran on James White—a rum chap for such a powerful man, didn't seem to smoke much or drink, and all against swearing—but a man, though, you had to allow him that. Did his duty and afraid of no one—cut up nasty most likely if ever he found out. Harry Small's smile broadened. After all what was life worth without a bit of a risk to give sauce to it; and Alice was worth it any day, more than worth it. He stretched his big body in pleasurable anticipation; and so quietly that even his phenomenally quick ears gave him only a moment's warning she came up to him from behind.

"Harry!"

"You've come, my dear."

"I am puffed; it's an awful pull up that bank."

"You're late."

" Late? You ought to be damned glad I've come at all."

Small's eye ran over her flushed, handsome face and her generous body.

" So I am," he allowed.

" I told him I was going to the pictures, and just for the moment I thought he was going to offer to come with me."

" Sergeant White go to the pictures? "

" He does sometimes."

" Not often, I'll bet."

She sat down on the log by him, still breathing quickly. He made no effort to caress her, there was plenty of time yet.

" Nice day," he said.

" Jimmy's off on this business at the Court. Who do you reckon did it, Harry? "

" That chap as lives with him, most likely."

" Lumsdale? "

" Yes. Unless it's one of the gentry whose woman he played about with."

Alice White looked up quickly. " What do you mean? " she asked. " What do you know about it? "

" I can't say as I *know* anything exactly, but I've heard a tale or two. 'E was a bit of an old cough-drop, wasn't he, for all this living alone and miser business? "

The woman was staring down the ride. " Did you see Jimmy on Monday night? " she asked suddenly.

" See him? No, of course I didn't. What's more

important to me is, did he see that Ruckley gang that was out."

" But if he had been out he would have seen them, wouldn't he? "

" Nyeton Wood's a big place, my dear," Small said, " big enough for you and me to get lost in, anyway; let's try."

He rose to his feet, stretched himself prodigiously, and bending with a sudden quick movement, picked the woman up in his arms and pressed her to him.

When her lips were free she gave a little gasp. " Oh, Harry, you are strong."

" Strong enough to pick you up, anyway; and put you down where I've a mind to."

" I like your cheek."

" Good job you do, my darling, 'cause if not you'd have to lump it."

" You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you? "

" Sure of one thing, anyway." He slipped his arm through hers and they began to walk away together.

" Can't we stay here? " she protested. " It's lovely in this bit of sun."

" It'll be lovelier still where I've a mind to go," he said; " there's a bit of a bank the other side of the ride where the turf's so soft you might be lying on a bed."

" All right, Harry," Alice said quietly.

They went down the ride a short distance and then turned off left-handed, following almost the same track that the dog-fox had used, a fact which caused Harry Small to laugh.

" What are you laughing at, Harry? "

" Thoughts."

" Penny."

" I'll tell 'em you presently, my dear, never mind no penny."

" Harry," she asked, after a pause, " what did you mean about old Burdett and—and women? What had you heard about him? "

" Some say he liked his bit of fun as well as anybody else, and why not? "

" But who with? Did you hear any names? "

" Lawson told me Mrs. Reeves had been up there a couple of times lately."

" Mrs. Reeves? " Alice laughed.

" Of course, come to think of it, she might have been going up on hunt business, though he never had much to do with the hounds; wouldn't part with the money."

Alice laughed again. " Did you hear about anybody else? " she asked.

" No. It's only village talk, anyway. And what's it matter now? It's a damned good job the old fool is dead, it'll keep your husband busy for a bit, anyway."

" He couldn't find the Inspector this morning."

" Let's hope he's still looking for him. Here, me dear, what about this? "

They had emerged from the side of the wood and overlooked an unexpected and charming little valley. Its slope lay to the south-west and formed a perfect trap for the afternoon sun, so that January and all

the bleak things of the year seemed further off than ever.

"Oh, it's lovely," Alice said.

"I call it my own particular bit; it's twice as warm here when there's a bit of afternoon sun as anywhere else."

"I suppose you've been here lots of times before? "

"Dozens—it's one of my regular walks."

"But I mean—you know what I mean—alone? "

"Sometimes, sometimes not."

"You beast! "

Small laughed easily. "Thought you'd had more sense," he said, "than to fret over what has been. If you'd got my job, Alice, you'd know as life soon slips by; them as are willing in the spring and won't, can't, come winter time. Take your fun when you can, me dear, that's the way of it."

With a sudden but unhurried movement he lifted her off her feet, held her for a moment in his arms, and then very gently laying her at full length on the grass, knelt down beside her.

She liked to be swept up like that and made to feel helpless by a man. She gloried in her own strength, but she gloried even more in losing that strength to someone stronger.

Harry was bending over her, his great shoulders blotting out half the sky. His breathing was quicker now, and gone was all his easy casualness. The hands that held her were hot, and a sort of animal magnetism, warm, overwhelming and delightful, surged into her from them.

She looked up at him and whispered, "Harry, this is better than the pictures."

"You bet it's going to be," he said. His strong hands slipped from her shoulders and held her for a minute under her armpits, pressing inwards.

With a little abandoned, hot laugh she pulled herself up, and throwing both arms round his neck, drew his lips down on to hers. He lowered her gently on to the grass.

. . . . . .

Sergeant White made a leisured journey down to the Hoops after his dinner. He was a trifle annoyed with the Inspector for not keeping the appointment of the morning, but no doubt (he reflected) his superior officer, who seemed quite a decent sort of chap as far as he went, had some good reason for it.

The Hoops was officially closed when he got there, but Edward Perry came to the back door quickly enough when he saw who was standing in the yard.

"Haven't seen Mr. Hylton since about ten or half-past this morning, when he came back from Morechester in the car. I've got his lunch waiting for him still."

"Did he say he'd be back for lunch?"

"Yes. Very particular about it. A bit of pork pie and some pickles he fancied—it's all ready for him now."

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"Not a word—off he went in that quick way of his, shouting out about the lunch over his shoulder."

Sergeant White nodded. "I expect he's got on to something that's keeping him longer than he thought," he said.

"I dare say. Wonderful quick chaps, these Scotland Yard men," Perry opined, hastening to cover up what might seem to be somewhat of a gaffe by adding, "Not as what we aren't satisfied with the locals round about here, all right. Jimmy, unofficially, how's it getting on? Are you after anybody particular?"

"Well, I'm not in charge of the case, but I think the Inspector's got his eye on one or two."

Perry recognized the practised hand of diplomacy and respected it. "Shall I tell him you were asking for him when he comes back?" he asked.

"You might say I was down this morning. I dare say I'll be back again about tea-time; he's sure to be here by then."

"Oh, aye, sure to be."

The Sergeant nodded, and turning, walked out of the yard. Edward Perry, arms akimbo (his favourite position), watched him go reflectively. . . . Rum sort of chap to be in the force (he reckoned); different from all the other country sergeants he had ever known: cut above them somehow; you could imagine him being an auctioneer or solicitor or something of that almost . . . but over and above that there was something queer about the Sergeant, you never

knew where you had him exactly; a bit of a deep 'un, somehow. . . .

Sergeant James White of the Sussex Constabulary stood undecided for a moment in the Square of Hope Enderton. It was busy with the ebb and flow of Saturday afternoon life. The half-timbered fronts and bowed windows of the shops, the market stalls clustered in the centre, the country carts, the very scavenging dogs were all part of a scene so familiar to the man that you might have thought he could look at it without seeing it almost; and yet on that bright January afternoon it seemed to him that all the details of it stood out in unwonted clearness—John Fenton talking to someone at the door of the Stores; the quick voice of a man selling eggs by auction; the bloodstains on the butcher's apron, who was slapping a leg of mutton in a familiar way and roaring out its many merits; these and a dozen other details of sound and colour stood out in stereoscopic clearness. . . . Life (James White thought); merchandise and marketing; eating and drinking; loving and giving in love. . . . He turned and walked slowly up the street. A variety of jobs offered themselves to him that afternoon; it wouldn't be a bad idea to go over to Punt and look up the constable there, a slack sort of man who wanted a lot of supervision; or there was the house half-way to Morechester (only just inside his boundary) where he was pretty sure three dogs were being kept without any licence; though really neither of these was so important as settling down to an afternoon's office work

at home where a growing pile of returns and reports and indents was waiting to be seen to. But James White felt disinclined for office work—maybe the January sun was calling him; in fact he felt disinclined for work of any sort. He left the village behind him, and scrambling up the high bank, cut across a newly sown field and so gained a footpath that led to one of his favourite walks. He wanted to get away from men and to be alone with his thoughts a little; he was a great man for being alone with his thoughts.

An occasional hodge working in a field of roots, or harrowing behind the glossy and colossal rumps of his two horses, cocked an eye as the broad-shouldered figure strode by hedgerow or coppice side and said to himself: " There goes the Sergeant from Enderton; wonder what he's after now." But their eyes deceived them; it was not the Sergeant from Enderton striding along in the diminishing sunshine, but the man James White; and he was after nothing more tangible than peace of mind.

" Neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring," the man in search of peace of mind said with a short, unmirthful laugh. It was a description he was fond of applying to himself, and its repetition brought him only that amount of easement which comes from a sardonic survey of a position already known to be thoroughly unsatisfactory.

James White often thought it would have been better for him if his father, who was born in a humble station of life, had stayed there and had not

suddenly acquired what was for him a small fortune. Most of the small fortune had been unselfishly spent in sending White to a public school, his father being determined that his son should have what he himself had lacked—education.

James White got his education, more than an average share of it, perhaps, for his brain was a quick one; but he got precious little else. What with the cost of educating his boy and a natural propensity to make a muddle of things, Mr. White had got rid of practically all his money, and when James left his public school, all the shining glory of his last year there still upon him, it was to come back to a home to which pride prevented him from asking his own friends, and to find a ready-made circle of acquaintances there with whom he had no desire to mix. He did what his nature easily prompted him to do—withdrew into himself.

The war came as a relief to him; he joined up in the ranks and for a time was content, doing his job, not speaking much to his fellows, resenting any intrusion on his jealously guarded privacy. But once again the bugbear of half-and-half pursued him. He was too good to be kept in the ranks and willy-nilly was given a commission. He could never quite rid himself of two obsessions; one (which he did not mind very much) that the men despised him as a ranker; and the other (which grew inwards and embittered him and deepened the naturally sardonic tone of his whole character) that his fellow officers, behind their outward politeness, were sneering at

him for not being quite one of themselves.

This grudge against the gentleman-born developed into a permanent obsession with James White, and like all obsessions, it was beyond the reach of any logic or reasonable argument. He did his work with the best of them; on the score of efficiency or courage he was not surpassed by any; but his pleasures he took alone. He drew into himself and mingled with nobody.

After the war he was for a time at a loose end; then a period—which he hated—in the Black and Tans preceded his final enlistment in the regular police force in England.

He had cut off from all his public school acquaintances now; his parents were dead (his mother had been killed long ago in an air raid) and their friends had never been his. He was alone, self-sufficient, self-dependent, and he would sooner have it so.

He seldom spoke unless he had to; did his work, which he enjoyed, as efficiently as ever, and rose steadily in his superiors' estimation as being a thoroughly dependable man and yet, somehow, a bit of a queer one. . . .

Then, in one year, he got his promotion to Sergeant, which did not much surprise him; and he met Alice Cooper, who did.

James White was not a virgin when he married Alice, but very nearly so; in spite of a good deal of knocking about he had been far less promiscuous than most men. All the intense concentration on

his own affairs which had grown to be such a habit with him now suddenly included another human being. Alice was his; he was always inclined to defy the world with that supreme fact. In spite of its cold-shouldering and disdain and snobbish treatment of him he had managed, miraculously it sometimes seemed to him, to wrest a prize from it. He had always been inclined to tell the rest of the world it could go to hell; it could go there in double quick time now, so long as it left him and his Alice alone.

This then was, partly, the frame of James White's mind as he walked across the Sussex countryside; and this, partly, was the trend of his thoughts. But he had eyes for other things as well; the super-normal clarity of detail with which the external world of the market-place had presented itself to his vision still persisted. He saw the little black buds of the ash already swelling with the promise of Spring, and the perky, jerky wrens busy among the banks and hedges excited by the unusual warmth of the sun. And when he skirted the old osier bed and took the bank that led up to Nyeton woods he stopped for a moment, half-way up, and looked back over that sweep of lovely country.

This was the land he had fought for. . . . A sarcastic smile pulled at the corners of his mouth . . . funny to think he had once believed in all the old flapdoodle . . . he didn't have many ideals left now, didn't want 'em . . . what a man wanted was a job and a home of his own and a wife of his own; and

if he had got those it was worth while taking risks to keep them . . . big risks. . . .

With these thoughts in his head he made his way through the woods, not without an almost automatic professional glance here and there for any signs there might be of poachers, and taking a tiny track that led off the main ride came out on to a charming and unexpected little valley.

. . . . . .

After he had seen the woman and the man James White stood stock still for a full minute, so still that he might have been turned to stone. The air was so quiet in that secluded valley that, though she was three hundred yards away, he could hear the woman's voice and could hear her laugh, Alice's rich, untrammelled laugh, vibrant with life and delight . . . no fear there, no hesitancy, nothing but pure animal pleasure, naked and unashamed. . . . He saw her stretch up her arms and with her head thrown back and her lovely black hair falling carelessly behind pull the man down on to her lips and bosom . . . *giving herself to him*; the phrase leaped into White's mind, he had read it somewhere, the phrase about a woman giving herself to a man; he had never thought to see it so perfectly illustrated. . . .

He turned and went back into the wood, back across the big ride and back along his path—not stumbling, or blinded, but deadly calm and (as he thought) complete master of all his senses. . . . *Giving herself to him,* the phrase kept running

through his mind, *giving herself to him.* It wasn't worth it then, wasn't worth taking any risks for the things you thought your own. . . .

Though he wasn't aware of it he went back to Enderton by exactly the same roundabout route he had taken from the village. When he got back the sun had set. The police cottage was empty; he let himself into the kitchen and sat in one of the hard wooden chairs staring at his hands on the enamel-topped table . . . *giving herself to him.* . . . When he heard a light footstep outside in the now fast-falling darkness he got up and pretended to busy himself with some crockery on a shelf, keeping his back to the door.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SHE came in, as she usually did, with a little flurry of movement and life. It had been that eager vitality in her that had first so attracted him; now he hated it.

"Hallo, Jimmy." Her voice was as apparently unaffected and sincere as ever, and he hated that, too.

He did not turn round, but kept his back to her and went on with his pretence of fiddling with the cups.

"What are you doing there?" she asked, laughing. "Going to get the tea?"

He managed to speak, and was astonished that his voice was steady and calm.

"I thought of it."

She crossed the room whistling a gay little tune. "Here, I'll see to it. I didn't think you'd be back so soon."

"I suppose not."

Her quick hands were already busy amongst the crockery.

"Did you have a good afternoon?" she asked, "and find out what you wanted to?"

" Yes."

He could have choked her there and then to stop that well-satisfied, happy whistling. He stood behind her and a little to one side and let his eyes play on the rich, healthy colour of her face and on the looseness of her hair.

"Your hair's very untidy," he couldn't help saying.

"Is it?" Alice laughed, and put up her two hands for a moment to subdue that dark waywardness. The very act of stretching was physically agreeable to her; her whole body was suffused with a glowing sense of warmth and well-being. She started to hum.

"Did you enjoy the pictures?" White asked.

"Yes, fairly well; I didn't stay for the full round, though."

"My God, they're good liars," the man thought, watching her.

"Anything special on?"

"No, nothing special; same sort of American film."

"The usual husband and wife stuff, I suppose?"

He saw the smile spread slowly over her face; he was waiting for it.

"Yes, the usual husband and wife stuff," she agreed. "Did you see your friend the Inspector?" she asked, reaching for the kettle.

"The Inspector? No, I haven't seen him yet."

"Perhaps he's lost," she said with a laugh.

"He wouldn't be the only one," White said sombrely.

She glanced up, and for the first time since coming in looked at him fairly and squarely.

"You're a nice cheerful one to come back to, I don't think," she said.

White returned her look and actually smiled. He was learning deceit, it seemed; hate is a good teacher. . . . *A nice cheerful one to come back to*; and what about the one she had only just left, her body still warm from his? . . . Something which he could no longer control moved in James White's brain, his smile actually deepened.

"I was out Nyeton way this afternoon," he said pleasantly. He saw her hand tighten on the handle of the kettle, and all he regretted was that it was not tightening from physical pain, her traitor head thrown back in agony and she screaming under the lash. He had seen men flogged in Ireland and had never thought to look back on the memory with pleasure.

"Nyeton way?" she asked coolly.

"Yes. Up in the woods—the Big Wood."

The kettle lid clattered on the stone floor; she made to pick it up and then stopped, looking at him. He let her look and thirty seconds of silence passed.

"What's the matter with picking up the kettle lid?" he suggested.

Her eyes left his for a moment and almost instantly flickered back again; then she bent and retrieved the fallen lid.

"Must have been nice out there to-day," she said.

"Especially in the sun."

She didn't answer that, but moved across the room to cut the bread and butter. An iron-strong hand,

perfectly cold (she shuddered a little at its accidental touch), closed on the handle of the long bread knife before hers could.

"I'll do that," her husband said affably, "you set the things out. Did you see anyone you knew at the pictures?"

"No."

"That's awkward."

"What do you mean?"

He laughed. "Suppose I didn't believe you had been there, it might be difficult to prove you had."

She straightened up from the table and looked directly at him; but her eyes were different now from when she had first come in, there was fear in their dark depths now.

"What's the game, Jimmy?" she asked quietly.

"The game? I don't know what you mean. You did go to the pictures, didn't you?"

"I don't have to answer to you for what I do every minute of the day, do I?"

"You said you were going on the bus to Morechester."

"And who says I didn't?"

"Of course it would be easy to find out if you did," White continued, as though he had not heard her; "people never think of that."

"Find out then."

"*You dirty bitch.*"

The savage whisper ran round the room and died away long before the silence was next broken.

"You saw us then?" she said at last, simply

because she must say something to break the awful spell of those expressionless eyes staring straight at her, into her.

White lifted up the bread knife and laid it at the end of the table, out of her reach.

"Yes, I saw you, this once," he said. "And how many dozens of times have there been when I haven't seen you?"

"Jimmy, honestly——"

"Honestly! My God, that's good, that's rich that is—honestly! Why, you whore——"

"Jimmy!"

"What's the matter? Don't you like being called what you are?"

"Don't be a damned fool, Jimmy, this isn't the first time this has happened to married people."

"It will be the last time it happens to me."

"You haven't even listened to what I've got to say, yet. I couldn't help it—I——"

"Go on."

"I—it isn't always a woman's fault, you must realize that. I—I couldn't help it, that's all."

"You liar. *You liar.*" White sat down slowly in the chair at the head of the table and stared at her, his right hand playing with the handle of the long, thin bread knife. "And to think I once thought you were worth trying to keep, worth taking a risk for. . . ."

She misunderstood him.

"I know you thought you were marrying beneath yourself when you married me," she said. "I know

you've always thought yourself a cut above me. You needn't rub it in. Well, now you're finding out you're right, that's all; other people are human, whatever you are."

He looked at her in silence until she could not bear it any longer.

"For God's sake don't sit there like that, saying nothing and staring at me as if you were mad. What are you going to do about it anyway?"

"I believe what Arthur Burdett said about you was right, now."

"What did he say about me?"

"He said you'd give your body to anyone for a five pound note."

"And when did he tell you all that?" she asked quietly. "Last Monday night?"

For the first time for minutes he dropped his eyes from hers.

"Last Monday night?" she asked again.

"I was out at Nyeton, where you're so fond of, on Monday night," he said. "I've told you that."

"Yes, you've told me. So were the Ruckley gang out at Nyeton, but you never saw them."

He raised his head slowly and met her gaze again, and after a pause he spoke in a curiously constrained voice.

"Maybe I wasn't out at Nyeton at all that night."

The woman's lips parted and an involuntary almost noiseless little "*A-ah!*" escaped her; she looked at him with a fascinated horror beginning to dawn in her eyes.

"I was beginning to think you weren't," she whispered, and then she made a fatal mistake, her eyes flickered uneasily towards the door.

White seemed to move his chair almost without rising from it. In its new position it commanded both the back door into the little garden, and the door into the dining-room. Alice was trapped in the corner of the kitchen farthest from either; she took a pace backward and flattened herself against the wall.

White had taken the bread knife with him when he moved; he was balancing it now in his right hand, watching the point hit the enamel top of the table and then bounce up again.

"So you were beginning to think I never went to Nyeton on Monday evening, eh? Why?"

No answer. Every time the knife point bounced up it caught the light which ran in a sort of golden streak along the sharp blade. Alice was too busy watching that to answer.

"When I married you," White went on, "it wasn't you I wanted so much as something of my own, something that life couldn't take from me; if you can understand that. I thought I had got it."

"Yes, Jimmy, I know about all that. I realize what I've done, but for God's sake be reasonable——"

"What do you call being reasonable?"

"What's the good of going on like this over something which can't be helped now. It isn't the end of everything——"

" Isn't it? " White asked, smiling and speaking softly.

" For God's sake, Jimmy," the woman shouted, " act sensibly. It's got to be give and take between us now. If you forget about this, I'll forget anything I know about Monday night and——"

The man stopped her with a snarl.

" Do you think I'd let you interfere with my life, now? " he said. " My life's *mine*, my own, it always has been and I'll keep it so." He stood up, and the scraping of his chair legs on the stone floor was the only sound in that small room until the woman broke the silence with a little sob of fear and called out:

" *Put that knife down.* If you come a step towards me I'll scream. I swear I will."

James White's hand closed more tightly round the knife handle. " You won't scream for long," he assured her, and he began to move.

He was stopped by an urgent knocking on the back door and a cheerful voice calling out, " Hallo! I say—anybody there? "

White stopped, and was amazed to find himself trembling suddenly; then after a long, reluctant look at the terrified woman, he very carefully placed the bread knife on the table, and crossing the room, opened the door.

" Good evening, Inspector," he said woodenly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NANCY FEATHERSTONE did not leave her house all day long. No tradesmen called (she had put them all off by telephone); her groom would not be back until six, and Annie not until after eight; she was completely alone with her thoughts—and her prisoner in the old strong-room upstairs.

Her thoughts were not particularly pleasant ones. She was a million miles from regretting her amazing action of the morning, but more sober reflection was making her realize that she could not keep the game up for many more hours. Even now she did not care much about the possible effects on herself; what worried her was whether the one day's respite she had been able to give Dale would prove sufficient for him. All that long afternoon, sitting in front of the drawing-room fire, smoking an interminable chain of cigarettes, she had visions of Dale with every man's hand against him and the cornered, helpless look in his eyes she had once seen in the eyes of some wretch being marched through the streets of London between two stalwart policemen. *That* incident she had regarded as an unpleasant necessity in the social scheme, not being

able to foresee that the day would come when her heart and all that went with it would be on the side of the hunted man.

Being a woman she was thorough; when she left the door of the Inspector's temporary prison in the middle morning she did not go near it again. No doubt he was hungry and thirsty by now; she honestly regretted that, having no personal grudge against him whatsoever; but she was not going to be fool enough to run any risks by trying to pass food or drink in to him.

She enjoyed being alone in the house, it gave her an opportunity to think, and her thoughts never long left what had been—as she now realized more and more—the real focal point of them for months past, Dale Shipley.

At four o'clock she walked into the kitchen to set about making herself some tea, and she had hardly put the kettle on when she was startled by the ringing of the front-door bell. A caller? It was possible; though she could not think of anyone, except the Rector, who would be at all likely to call. She thought at first of simply lying doggo and of letting whoever it might be get tired of ringing and go away; but on second thoughts she decided it might be unwise to do that. If the man upstairs were by any chance to start calling out the fat might be in the fire. The bell sounded again, somewhat impatiently, and she left the kitchen and made her way to the front door, turning over in her mind various methods of getting rid of the Rev. Steeble

with the maximum of politeness and the minimum of delay.

She opened the front door and stood in speechless amazement. Dale Shipley, blatantly at ease and aggressively cheerful, stood on the doorstep.

" Hallo, Nancy," he cried breezily. " I just looked round to say I can manage to-night after all, if it still suits you."

Complete silence followed, and even to Dale's ego-centric eye it became evident that something was amiss.

" What's up? " he asked. " You look scared out of your wits."

Nancy found her tongue. " In God's name what have you come back for? " she said in a whisper. " They're after you."

Shipley looked at her as though he thought she was mad.

" Who's after me? " he asked at last.

" The police—the Inspector."

" The Inspector chap? What on earth for? "

" For Arthur Burdett—for murdering him."

Dale Shipley stared at her in comic astonishment, then he put back his head and laughed loud and long; he was feeling in high good humour and this totally unexpected jest was a rare tit-bit to end up the day with.

" Well, he's making a damn fool of himself," he said, still laughing, " because I didn't murder Arthur Burdett any more than you did."

There are few things more convincing of inno-

cence than honest laughter; Nancy felt as though she wanted to sit down until a bewildering world stopped going round and round.

" D'you mean to say you didn't do it? " she asked.

Dale looked sharply at her. " Good God, no," he said. " Don't be a damn fool, Nancy, you don't seriously think I did the old fool in, do you? "

" I——" she took a deep breath, " I—I thought you might have done."

" Of course, I might, and so might anybody else in the village if it comes to that. But why pick on me? I can't imagine what gets hold of you women sometimes. Anyway, I'm not too late for a cup of tea, am I? "

Nancy stepped back from the door and made him welcome. " No, you're not too late for tea, Dale," she said. " I'm just making it."

" Annie out? " he asked, stepping inside.

" Yes, Annie's out."

" Didn't you hunt to-day? "

They were both in the drawing-room now and suddenly she laid a quick hand on his shoulder and said, " Dale, what about that note? What did that mean? "

" I—I had to go up to Town on some business. I thought I was in a bit of a hole, but as it turned out I wasn't. You can forget that note, Nancy."

There was something about his answer and the manner of it that was unsatisfactory to her. She

tightened her grip on his shoulder and made him face her.

" Dale," she said slowly, " for God's sake tell me the truth—did writing that note have anything to do with—with Arthur Burdett? "

" With Arthur Burdett? How the hell should it? "

" You didn't run away because—because you killed him? "

" You must be going batty, Nancy. I had no more to do with killing Arthur Burdett than the man in the moon."

" You swear that, on your honour? "

" I'll swear it on a stack of Bibles if you like—I can't think why you suddenly picked on me."

She had to believe him, and yet she was still not quite satisfied.

" The Inspector thinks you did it—he's after you——"

" After me? "

" Yes. For heaven's sake, Dale, don't play the fool about this; if you had anything to do with it you're in danger, now, here."

There was an urgency in her voice which brought some sort of response from him.

" Look here, Nancy," he said soberly, " I swear in God Almighty's name I had no more to do with killing Arthur Burdett than your grey hunter had; and what's more, nobody can possibly tie me up in it in any way."

" You're sure of that? "

" Of course, positive. Why, I wouldn't give a damn if the Inspector were here now. What's the matter? "

Nancy had subsided into a chair and was shaking with silent laughter—laughter, though Dale couldn't know it, which was the outcome of six hours of nervous tension.

" What the deuce is the game, Nancy? " he asked irritably. " Is it some sort of a joke or something? "

Nancy ended up her spasm somewhere between a sob and an hysterical hiccup.

" Yes—in a way it is," she said. " If you sit here I'll go and get the tea."

Dale grunted. " And for the Lord's sake get out of your head the idea that I murdered old Burdett," he grumbled in his usual amiable fashion.

When Nancy left the drawing-room it was not the preparations for tea that claimed her attention. The fact of Dale's return, and above all his manner, had convinced her that he was speaking the truth. She had made a colossal bloomer, and being in many ways a simple, direct person it seemed to her that the best thing was to go and put it right as far as she could straight away. Accordingly she went straight upstairs, made her way along the corridor to the old strong-room, and turning the key in the lock, threw open the door.

" I'm afraid I've made rather a mistake, Mr. Hylton," were her first words.

" My God, you have, believe me," was Kingsley Hylton's reply, in the tones of controlled rage only

possible to a man who has been nursing a grievance for some five hours.

The Inspector was bored to the verge of desperation, chattering with cold, and ravenously hungry. Five hours in the comparatively commodious strong-room had given him time and occasion to revise his views about the nature of a couple of days spent in the cells.

"I should damn well think you have made a mistake, young lady," he said viciously; "as soon as ever I can get in touch with White you'll be arrested for being an accessory after the fact."

"Yes, I dare say. By the way, Mr. Shipley's downstairs. I thought you'd like to know."

Hylton stared at this extraordinary woman.

"What do you mean, he's downstairs?" he asked suspiciously. "What's the game now?"

"Mr. Hylton, I'm frightfully sorry. I can't expect you to believe that, of course, but I really am. You'll never realize why I had to—to keep you here, but that doesn't matter. What does matter is that Dale Shipley's here and, Inspector, *he didn't do it.*"

"Didn't he?" Hylton asked grimly. "We'll give him a chance to tell us all about that at the station. Where is he?"

Nancy was overcome with a flood of misgivings as she silently led the way back to the drawing-room. If there had been any way out of going back to Dale she would have taken it; but there wasn't; she found herself at the drawing-room door, with the irate In-

spector behind her, as inevitably as though they had both been drawn there by a magnet.

" Just a minute," Hylton said quietly, " I think I'll go first." He plucked Nancy by the arm, and she stood on one side to let him pass. He turned the handle and pushed the door open, but did not immediately go in. He had allowed himself to be made a fool of once that day and did not propose to repeat the experiment. However, the only thing that happened when the door swung inwards was that an aggrieved voice called out in a typically Dale Shipley-ish manner, " What about that tea, Nancy? "

When Hylton went into the room he saw Dale Shipley sunk comfortably in the best armchair, smoking one of Nancy's cigarettes; the young man seemed surprised to see who the entrant was.

" Hallo," he asked cheerfully, " what are you doing here? "

" Never mind about that," Hylton snapped irritably. " The point is, what are you doing here? "

" Me? Why shouldn't I be here? "

" Where were you last night? "

" What's that got to do with you? "

Kingsley Hylton swallowed hard. Normally he was a man of equable temper, and he had never been nearer explosion point in his life; on top of everything else there was a faintly ridiculous quality about the day's misadventure which only made him feel more angry.

" Young man," he said grimly, " this whole damn village seems to be running mad, but it strikes me

you must be about the maddest of them all. You don't seem to realize that I propose to arrest you on suspicion of having murdered Arthur Burdett on Monday, the eighteenth."

"I never even saw old Burdett on Monday, the eighteenth."

"You didn't?"

"No."

"You were nowhere near Enderton Court that night, were you?"

"I didn't go to the Court on Monday or for a week before."

"Let's see, you went to Captain Reeves for dinner, didn't you, that evening?"

"Yes, half a dozen people will prove that."

"Oh, I dare say; the same half-dozen will also prove that you didn't arrive at Ferney House until considerably after half-past seven."

"Well?"

"Having left your own house at a quarter to."

For the first time in the interview Shipley seemed a trifle discomforted; his eyes darted to Nancy standing in the doorway. "I never said so," he objected.

"No; of course you didn't; but it happens to be the truth, doesn't it?"

"Supposing it is?"

"You took over three-quarters of an hour to walk a mile."

"I might have been a long way round."

"You might also have been at the bottom of the

side lane leading up to Enderton Court where you lost this." The Inspector brought out Shipley's cigarette-case with dramatic effect.

The young man himself was obviously put out by its appearance, and Nancy's grip tightened on the door handle.

"When were you last at Enderton Court?" Hylton asked casually.

"Some time ago."

"Um. You can't remember the exact date?"

"Why on earth should I? I don't even know what date it is to-day."

"You were at Enderton Court on January the twelfth, Shipley, and on that day you quarrelled with your uncle over something, to such an extent that he cut you out of his will."

Dale shot an angry, suspicious glance from the Inspector to Nancy and back again. "What have you two been playing at?" he demanded. "Only one person knew about that quarrel besides myself."

"*Dale*——"

"Wrong as usual," Hylton interjected. "Burdett's lawyer knew; you've forgotten him; and what's more, the whole world will know as soon as the will is proved, because it's all in there."

"The old swine!"

"Quite so; but let's stick to the matter in hand. You quarrelled with your uncle and were disinherited by him on January 12th; a week later he is murdered, and on the night on which he is murdered you take three-quarters of an hour to walk a mile and can be

proved to have been at any rate near the house at about the time of the crime. On top of that you bolt up to London a few days after investigations start——"

"He's come back, Inspector."

"And a friend of yours deliberately hinders the police from doing their duty by following you."

"What on earth are you talking about now?"

"Never mind that for the moment. I admit I don't know why you should have come back; it doesn't seem to make sense at the minute, and for that reason and that reason only I'm willing to give you a chance. If you can give me here and now a satisfactory account of all you did on Monday evening I'll be willing to listen to it. If it sounds plausible and can be proved true I'll do no more than keep you under strict police supervision. If I'm not satisfied in every way I shall arrest you now on suspicion."

Dale seemed for the first time to realize that there was some sort of reality of danger in his position. His glance flickered uneasily towards Nancy.

"I'll tell you all about Monday," he said surlily, "if we can talk alone."

"We can't talk alone," Hylton assured him without hesitation; "whether you are charged with anything or not, Miss Featherstone will be. She's in on this and has got to stay here; so get on with it."

"There's nothing to tell really——"

"Right-oh," Hylton chimed in briskly. "In that case you better come to Morechester straight away, and we'll talk business there—at the station."

"I mean it's nothing to do with the murder," Dale amended.

"I'll be judge of that," the Inspector assured him. "What's the yarn?"

Dale shot another quick glance at Nancy, and then a little shamefacedly began to tell his story.

"It's got absolutely nothing to do with the murder business," he repeated, "and I only tell it under protest."

"Never mind about protesting, we've got past that stage, get on with it."

Dale shrugged his shoulders. "You may know that there's a man at the Lodge called Lawson——"

"Um—what of it?"

"He's got a daughter—Frances." Dale kept his glance well away from Nancy now, and the Inspector noticed that he didn't look at her again for the rest of his story. "The other day Frances told me she was going to have a baby——"

"Is she married?"

"No."

"Whose was the baby going to be—yours?"

"So she said. I didn't like it, naturally; if we had both kept our heads I thought we might still be all right, but, just like a girl, she got in an awful state and flummox about it all."

"How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

"Um."

"She was worrying me on Monday morning about it, so I said I'd meet her that evening and talk it over.

She always goes into Morechester on Monday afternoons, and I told her if she caught the bus out in the evening I'd meet her at the end of the back drive at ten to seven. I thought I could have a quarter of an hour with her and still be in time at the Reeves. I got there about five to seven and waited till twenty past; she hadn't turned up by then (as a matter of fact she missed the bus and had to wait for the next) and I couldn't wait any longer, so I walked down the side lane and on to the main road again. That's all."

Hylton smiled grimly. "Did you see anybody at all whilst you were there?" he asked.

"I ran into a tramp sort of fellow at the bottom of the lane; he came out of one of the Enderton fields actually."

"And what did you say to him?"

"I only told him it would be a damn sight healthier for him not to start any poaching games—not that I really minded much whether he poached old Burdett's land or not, but I was feeling pretty fed up with the girl for not turning up. I didn't hear anything from her the next day, and then, on Wednesday, when Lawson called to see me at my house I thought the fat was in the fire all right; but as a matter of fact he didn't know anything about it, and had only come about a horse which I didn't want."

"You didn't go to see the girl?"

"No damn fear; I wasn't going near the place if I could help it. I couldn't make out what was happening to her, and I was hoping it had all blown over; then, on Friday night, I got a letter from her from

London. She had gone up by the afternoon train, without saying a word to her people, to see her married sister in Battersea, or some such God-forsaken spot; said she was sure she was going to have the baby and couldn't face her parents and God knows what flapdoodle. Well, what was I to do? I had to go and see her and find out the worst, so I threw a few things in a suitcase and caught the evening train to Town. It's nonsense to say I was running away from anything; why, I wrote a note that evening to Miss Featherstone here telling her about it."

"Is that true, Miss Featherstone?"

Nancy gave a despairing sort of sigh. "Yes, it's true enough," she said. "All this stupid mess up is entirely my fault, I can see that now. But, Dale, in heaven's name why couldn't you be honest and say in your note what it was all about?"

"Be honest?" Dale echoed aggrievedly. "I can't see where I've been dishonest. I made sure everyone would be talking about it soon enough."

"What happened in London?"

"I went down to the address she wrote from, in this ghastly Battersea place, and there she was with her sister. Of course, the whole thing was wind-up. She had never had the pluck to go to a doctor round here, and as soon as her sister made her go to one in London he told her she was no more going to have a baby than I am. I will say her sister acted like a brick; I told her there was no sense in making unnecessary trouble and she quite agreed. She sent a telegram to Lawson at the Lodge and put it right

with him somehow; made out that Frances only went up there on a spree or something like that. Anyway the girl's back at home now and nobody knows anything about it—except us here."

A lengthy silence followed this illuminating narrative; before the silence was broken Nancy turned and quietly left the room, and Hylton, though aware of what she was doing, did nothing to hinder her.

"So your skin's safe, anyway," he said eventually to Shipley.

Dale laughed awkwardly. "I didn't want to get the girl into trouble, and I suppose I should have had to see her through if I had; but all that's over now, and anyway, it's got nothing to do with Arthur Burdett. I didn't go near the old fool on Monday, and what's more there isn't anyone in the world who can possibly prove that I did."

"And what about that murderous stick of yours?"

"My stick? I always take that with me when I'm walking, especially at night. I've trimmed up half a dozen poachers with that before now."

"Um." Kingsley Hylton gazed at the unwontedly communicative young gentleman and unconsciously shook his head sadly; he was loath to relinquish what had just begun to promise to turn into a cast-iron case.

"I haven't the slightest idea whether you're lying or not," he said at length. "I can check up on your story, of course, to a certain extent. What's the address in Battersea you went to?"

"93 Park House Drive."

"Um. We'll see about all that—but whether you're lying or not you are still under suspicion of murdering Arthur Burdett. I shall have a constable up at your place to-night and for the next few days, so don't try any tricks."

"I wonder if you'd like a cup of tea, Mr. Hylton." Nancy appeared at the door carrying a tray, and on it Hylton's famished eye was rejoiced by the sight of a steaming tea-pot and bread and butter in thick slices.

A man who has had nothing to eat since an early breakfast is not proof against such a tempting sight; Hylton fell on the tea without apology or delay, and whilst the food vanished with miraculous swiftness the other two sat and watched him in a strained silence.

Whilst he ate, the Inspector's agile mind was busy. Bubbling up through a layer of official condemnation and human anger at his treatment was an undercurrent of laughter. Try as he might Kingsley Hylton could not help seeing the funny side of what had happened to him. And, if Shipley's story was true, the delay had not done him much harm. The first thing obviously was to check up on the young man's story, and with that intention in mind he drained the last drop of tea, scraped together the few remaining crumbs of bread and butter and pushed the tray from him.

"If you wouldn't mind waiting a minute in the hall, Miss Featherstone . . ." he suggested.

Nancy silently took up the tea-tray and left the room with it.

Dale fidgeted nervously in his chair and Hylton eyed him speculatively.

"I suppose you're tied up now with this girl at the Lodge," he said suddenly.

"Good Lord, no. She's got a regular boy in the village somewhere. She's one of the warmest little bits round here. All this happened about a month ago at Enderton Fair; she was out for a bit of fun and I gave it her, that's all. I'll take damn good care I never go near her again now, and if she's got any sense she'll stick to the fellow she's walking out with."

Hylton nodded and rose to his feet.

"Don't forget you're still under suspicion; if your story doesn't check up you're in for trouble. Oh, and by the way"—he turned at the door to add his last words—"I suppose it has never entered your head to let a decent girl get hold of you and try to make something worth while out of you, has it?"

"What d'you mean?"

"If any girl had done for me what Miss Featherstone did for you to-day, Shipley, I'd go down on my knees to thank her; but you're so damned egotistical you're blind." Hylton slammed the door behind him and left a surprised and crestfallen young man in the drawing-room.

Nancy was waiting in the hall.

"Mr. Hylton," she said quickly, as he came towards her, "I want to apologize for what I did.

Please don't think I'm running away from it, I'm only speaking personally now."

Kingsley Hylton stared at her for a moment in silence. . . . The everlasting miracle (he was thinking), what women will do for men, and for what men. . . .

"You know what it means?" he asked.

She made a wry little face. "Something very unpleasant."

"Why did you do it?"

"I had to. You see, I thought it was vitally important, for him, and so I had to."

Hylton nodded.

"And now, it seems that I have simply made a fool of myself."

Again the Inspector nodded.

"Miss Featherstone," he said gently, "I've been cursed with a most curious memory. Do you know, I am beginning to think that I can forget all about what happened to-day—on one condition."

"On one condition?"

"Yes. That you go, now, into that room, and tell Dale Shipley what you did and why you did it."

Nancy Featherstone stared at him; then she turned from white to brick red; she seemed to have some sort of difficulty in finding words; at length she managed to blurt out:

"I—I think you are a frightfully good sort."

Kingsley Hylton smiled and went towards the front door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Good evening, Inspector."

Even in his own mentally agitated state Hylton noticed a certain curious stolidity about the Sergeant's greeting.

"Hallo, White. I saw a light through the side window so I thought I'd come in this way—hope I'm not disturbing your tea or anything."

"Not a bit; come in."

It was on the tip of Hylton's tongue to cry out, "Good Lord, what's the matter with your wife?" The woman was standing in a corner of the room, poker-straight against the wall and looking as white as death.

"I went to the Hoops as you told me," White said.

"Yes—I'm sorry I wasn't there; as a matter of fact I've had rather an extraordinary day."

"Yes?"

The man's voice was so entirely wooden and uninterested that Hylton glanced up sharply; the thought suddenly occurred to him that maybe he had committed a solecism by coming to the private side door instead of the official front.

"I say," he laughed, "I'm afraid I have rather interrupted tea. I'm sorry."

"That's all right, sir."

A long, thin knife on the table caught Hylton's attention; he picked it up and said, "That's a useful-looking sort of knife, Sergeant."

"Perhaps we better go into the office," White suggested.

"Right-oh, let's. There are half a dozen things I want to talk about—if Mrs. White will excuse us." He looked up with one of his quick smiles at the woman who had not yet said a word; she nodded, and when the two men moved across the room she followed them.

At the doorway White made to stand on one side, but Hylton, never a stickler for ceremony, pushed him through. "Go on," he said, "after you." White led the way, and the Inspector was half through the doorway following him when something plucked at his arm.

He turned to find Alice White standing there. She said nothing, but there was a look about her, something wild and frightened and yet horribly triumphant in her eyes which suddenly crystallized for Kingsley Hylton the feeling which had been at the back of his mind ever since he entered the house —the feeling that, somehow, there was something wrong with the atmosphere of the place.

He was just about to ask the woman what she wanted when, divining his intention to speak, she shook her head. She said nothing, but simply moved her eyes in the direction of the man who had just left the room and back again to the Inspector, nodding

twice quickly; then she dropped her detaining fingers from his arm and noiselessly moved into the centre of the kitchen.

Hylton hesitated in bewilderment for a moment, and then realizing that the woman would give him no further sign or message, followed the Sergeant who was already entering the homely little office room.

"I suppose you hung round the Hoops most of the day," he said after he had lit a cigar and made himself comfortable.

"A good part of it. As you definitely told me to meet you there I naturally didn't want to miss you."

"My fault entirely—as a matter of fact I had quite a peculiar day, in some ways the most peculiar I've ever had—still, that's neither here nor there at the moment. I was up at Fielden Cottage early this morning, and the first thing I discovered there was that young Shipley had done a bolt."

James White seemed interested for the first time that evening. "Mr. Shipley bolted?" he asked. "Whatever for?"

"Curiously enough, Sergeant, that's the very question I asked myself; and I thought I knew the answer to it. But I didn't; at least it seems that I didn't. Do you know anything of Miss Frances Lawson?"

"The Lodge-keeper's daughter? From what I can hear of her she's like the rest of women, go with any man she can get hold of."

"Um. Well, it seems that way, I must say."

Hylton gave a full account of Dale Shipley's story, to which White paid so little attention that the Inspector was moved to break off and inquire rather sharply:

"You listening, Sergeant?"

"Yes, I'm listening."

"And you think it likely or not?"

"Very likely, I should think. Besides, if Shipley cut and ran because of this murder business he would hardly stroll back a day later, would he?"

Hylton was forced to admit the force of this. "Not unless he's very deep," he said, "and then, of course, his story checks. I went straight from Miss Featherstone's . . ."

"From Miss Featherstone's, sir?"

"That's where I saw Shipley, but that's another story. I went straight from there to the Lodge and was lucky enough to catch Miss Frances alone. I had a good thirty minutes with her. Half the time she was scared to death, of course, and the other half bucked no end to think this baby business wasn't true after all. To me the expressive but horrible phrase of our American counterparts, she 'came clean,' and I must say her yarn fitted in in every detail with young Shipley's."

"Then it looks all right."

"It *looks* all right, certainly; but if Dale Shipley didn't do it——"

"I don't think Dale Shipley did the murder, Inspector."

"You've said that before, White. You seem damn

sure of it; I don't quite know why. But if Shipley didn't do it, who the devil did?"

Any illuminating answer which the Sergeant might have been going to make to this pertinent query was forestalled by the shrill insistence of the telephone bell.

"The super at Morechester wants a word with you, sir," he said, handing the instrument over.

"That Inspector Hylton?" he heard. "Superintendent Young, Morechester, this end. Sorry to trouble you, Inspector, could you pop over straight away and see us? . . . Yes, I think it's urgent all right. . . . I'd rather not say on the telephone if you don't mind, Inspector. . . . No, never mind about bringing him, I think it will do if you just come alone. . . . I've sent the car already, told it to go to the Hoops, didn't know where best to pick you up; it ought to be there in a few minutes now. . . . Thank you very much. . . ."

"Damn," Hylton said fervently, replacing the instrument. "They want me to go over to Morechester—started some hare-brained theory, I suppose, but I shall have to go; they're sending a car to the Hoops—a nuisance, just when I was looking forward to a game of chess, too."

"Perhaps you'll go out the front way," Sergeant White suggested, and accompanied him to the door.

"Will you be coming back here?" he asked on the doorstep.

"I might—depends how long they keep me."

"Well, you'll find me if you do," said James White.

He stood at the door until the Inspector reached the little gate on to the road, then shutting the door he turned and went slowly into the kitchen.

He found it as he expected to find it—empty—conveniently empty, he thought with a harsh laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

KINGSLEY HYLTON left the police cottage pondering over the queer atmosphere which he had sensed so strongly in the house. . . . "Interrupted a domestic row of some sort," was his ultimate verdict. "I bet that woman is a bit of a handful, too, when she's raised."

The car arrived at the Hoops almost as soon as he did, but he learnt nothing from the rather wooden-headed, monosyllabic and extremely correct young constable who was driving it.

"Sorry I couldn't come for you myself, Inspector," Superintendent Young greeted him. "We're short-handed what with all the men we've got out on this Enderton job, and I couldn't very well leave the station. Have a smoke?"

"Stick to my own, thanks; what's the trouble?"

"Well, Inspector, it's this chap Durley that you picked up in the car yesterday——"

Hylton smiled. "Young Mr. Fanshawe's friend? What does he want?"

The Superintendent hesitated. "Perhaps we better have him in and you can hear for yourself," he said.

"Right-oh."

The Superintendent touched a bell and told the red-faced constable who answered it to bring Durley along from the cells.

Hylton, always content to wait until things unfolded themselves, passed the time in taking stock of the Superintendent's comfortable office; the Super didn't offer to break the silence and sat looking through some papers and occasionally taking an appraising glance at his celebrated colleague from the Yard.

" Alfred Durley, sir."

Alfred Durley, looking slightly sprucer as a result of the enforced cleanliness connected with a night in police cells, entered the room. All his habitual and ingrained suspicion and mistrust when having anything to do with the forces of the law were very evident, and the permanently lugubrious expression on his face only deepened when he saw the *fons et origo* of all his trouble sitting in the room.

" Hallo, Weary Willy," Hylton greeted him. " What's your trouble now? "

Alf Durley nodded a mistrusting salute.

" Now, Durley," the Super said briskly, " tell the Inspector here what you told me—and let's have the truth, mind."

" Let him sit down, Super," Hylton suggested. " His sort find it hard to tell the truth at the best of times."

The Superintendent indicated a chair on which Mr. Durley perched himself gingerly.

" Fire ahead," the Super urged.

Alf Durley cleared his throat and addressed himself to the Inspector.

"It's about this 'ere business on Monday night, mister," he said. "When you and the other gennelman gave me a lift yesterday that was a bit of all right, that was; but of course I was fair taken aback like when you turned out to be 'oo you are. What I told you about meeting the young gennelman who 'ad the cigarette-case was gospel, I'll swear to that in the box. 'E came along just like I told you and asked me if I was poaching and waved his stick at me and everything just like I said. It's about when 'e left me I thought I ought to tell you of, like."

"What happened then?"

"Well, mister, after the young gennelman 'ad gone I thought to myself, 'Alf Durley, where's yer supper?' and I 'adn't got no bleeding supper, that was the long and the short of it. So, seeing I was near the big 'ouse up the lane, I thought I'd go up and see if there was anything doing——"

"See if you could steal anything," the Super put in. "Go on."

Durley blinked his eyes virtuously at this interruption and addressed himself more pointedly than ever to the Inspector.

"To see if there was anything doing. 'Corse I knew the old boy was pretty close and all that, but I thought 'no 'arm in 'aving a look round,' so up I went. There's a kind of a back drive runs up to the 'ouse from the lane, and I was just about turning in

there when I 'eard someone acoming down it. Moving very quick 'e was, and quiet like, but I 'eard 'im. I never 'ave been one to push myself forward, so I dare say I drew back a bit into the shadow, and in about 'alf a minute along comes the Sergeant——"

"The *what?*" Hylton asked.

"The police sergeant from Enderton, the same one as you took me to see last night——"

Hylton looked from Durley to the Superintendent, who was sitting with a satisfied grin on his face, as much as to say, "I told you there'd be something worth listening to."

"You're talking through your hat, Durley, you must have made a mistake."

"Not likely. Why, 'e wasn't 'arf a dozen yards away, couldn't 'ave been. I saw 'im as plain as plain. Anyway I *must* 'ave seen 'im plain, I reckergnized 'im. I've seen Sergeant White about the roads fifty times, and I reckergnized him."

"What time was this?"

"Not many minutes after the 'arf-hour."

"What half-hour?"

"Seven, mister. I was in Enderton before eight."

Hylton shook his head. "You're wrong somewhere," he said. "Either you've got the time wrong, or it wasn't Sergeant White—it couldn't have been."

Durley nodded his head and gave the croak that was his expression of mirth.

"Well, Alf Durley's seen a ghost, then," he said, "first time ever."

Kingsley Hylton stared at the tramp with a worried expression on his face—yet an expression which but faintly showed forth the worried state of his mind; he was recalling vividly that unexplained moment in the police cottage when Alice White had plucked him by the arm and tried to say unfathomable things with her eyes.

" You're spinning a yarn, Durley," he said suddenly. " What's at the back of it? What have you got against Sergeant White? "

" Honest to Gawd, mister, it's the truth. I haven't got a thing against the Sergeant, 'e's never 'ad me up or anything. All I know is the truth, and that is Sergeant White come down the back drive there as near after 'arf-past seven Monday night as doesn't matter."

" Um. Supposing we pretend to believe you for a minute, what did you do then? "

" Mister," Alf Durley said with great earnestness, " I beat it. I wasn't going poking my nose in, if there was any rozzers about. For all I knew the Sergeant might 'ave been acoming back any minute. What did I do? I just didn't go up the back drive, not a yard; round Alf Durley turned and straight to the 'Oops at Enderton—I was there before eight. I can prove it."

" These chaps are such congenital liars you never know what's truth and what isn't," Hylton said evenly.

" He was in the Hoops at eight, I've checked up on that."

"There you are, mister," Durley said in a virtuous voice.

"Why are you suddenly telling us this yarn, Durley?" Hylton asked. "Why one tale last night and another now?"

"Because I've been thinking, mister, and I'm not quite a fool yet. First thing I says to myself when I 'eard the old boy had been kiboshed was 'You 'old your tongue, Alf Durley; them as don't speak can't get into trouble,' I says. All right. Then comes yesterday, me asking for a lift innocent-like and copping all this packet of trouble. I was fair put about, I can tell you, especially when you ran me into Sergeant White's 'ouse. I told the tale as I thought best at the moment, leaving out about going any nearer the big 'ouse than the end of the lane. But last night in the cell I 'ad time to think a bit more, and I thought, 'Suppose the Sergeant saw me same time as I seen 'im?' I didn't think 'e 'ad, but suppose 'e 'ad, and was lying doggo about it, and this 'ere cigarette-case business was only an excuse to keep me till they get the evidence together? My Gawd, that put me in a sweat, I don't mind telling you, mister. I could see meself 'anging next. I thought it wouldn't look very good if they could prove I'd been at the bottom of the back drive and me saying something different all the time, so this afternoon I decided I might as well tell the extra bit, and that's Gawd's own Gospel truth, mister, if it's on me death-bed."

"Send him back to the cells, Super," Hylton said

after a long pause, and when Mr. Alf Durley had been duly disposed of the two police officers faced each other.

"Well, what do you make of it?" the Superintendent asked.

Hylton shook his head. "I honestly don't know what to make of it. He must be lying, of course, but why?"

"Why should he go to all this trouble to lie?"

"Dammit all that's just what I'm asking."

"Unless he really is scared that White saw him there then."

"But White wasn't there then, that's the whole point; he didn't get to the house until well after nine, we know that."

"No, that's right, Inspector. I wonder if White has had any dealings with Durley before—had him up for vagrancy or anything?"

"He didn't say so last night, but it's possible."

"Do you know, Inspector, I can't help thinking that fellow is telling the truth, somehow."

"Who—Durley?" Hylton laughed. "Well, you've got a queer sense of time values, Super, that's all I can say; but to put your mind to rest, and mine too for that matter, I'll go straight back to White and see what he says about the whole thing."

"Perhaps that is a good idea."

"Sometimes these insoluble problems have the silliest sort of explanations."

"That's right, Inspector."

"Though personally I'm inclined to think that

the explanation of this is that Alf Durley is a born liar, a hardened liar, an habitual and chronic liar, and that he just can't help lying as a matter of nature."

"Well, maybe so, sir. Shall I order the car for you?"

. . . . . .

Hylton stopped the car at the Hoops and sent it back from there. His tea, taken under such unusual circumstances at Nancy Featherstone's, had been only in the nature of a stop-gap, and he was feeling so ravenously hungry again that he decided that his interview with Sergeant White would have to be postponed for twenty minutes or so. This interval was put to excellent use in the back room at the Hoops, and it was a Kingsley Hylton rendered a good deal more cheerful by the absorption into his system of a pint of old ale and a small pork pie who set out on foot later for the police cottage.

Reflection during his meal-time had made it more evident than ever to him that Alf Durley's tale (for some inscrutable reason best known to that strange individual) must be a tissue of lies. Men usually lie from vanity or fright, the Inspector knew. Vanity is a quantity so incalculable that it admits of no reasoning; but if Alf Durley was lying from fright, *what was he really frightened of?* Hylton sincerely hoped that White did know something about the man, for more, certainly, would have to come to light before they could be satisfied. All this went forward on the surface of his mind; underneath, aided by the

feeling of ease consequent upon good food and tobacco, was the comfortable thought that when the Durley business was disposed of a game of chess with Sergeant White would be a very pleasant thing.

. . . . . .

No light was showing in the front of the cottage, so, remembering White's assurance that he would find him there, the Inspector made his way round to the back. All this, too, was in darkness, rather to his surprise—surprise which was increased considerably when on making to knock on the kitchen door he found it to be ajar.

He felt certain that the house would hardly be left unlocked with nobody in it, and pushing the door wide open he stepped inside and called "White."

His voice ran round the little kitchen and died away in the dark interior of the cottage. There was no answer; but the Inspector, standing there on the threshold of the dark kitchen, got the distinct impression that something moved near him.

Once again he called out "White," and once again there was no answer; he took an undecided pace into the kitchen to investigate and then abruptly stopped. His step had brought his face into contact with something 'twixt floor and ceiling which gave at his touch. In complete bewilderment he put up his hand to examine this unexpected object, and found that it swung away from him with a ponderous facility. His fingers encountered the roughness of serge cloth, the smooth roundness of a button. . . .

"What the devil——" he muttered to himself, and

then suddenly stopped in a cold sweat of horror and fear. His fingers running gaily higher and higher had found something which he did not like.

"*Christ Almighty*——" he swore stupidly to himself, and without more ado backed away until he hit the kitchen wall and his hand stumbled on the electric light switch.

The merciless yellow efficiency lit up the small kitchen. The table had been pushed, or kicked, to one side, and what now adorned the centre of the room was the body of Sergeant James White dependent by a stout piece of rope from a tie rod that ran close to the ceiling. It still swayed slightly from Hylton's unwitting contact with it, and the feet in their regulation boots almost scraped the floor. Sergeant James White's face was not a pretty sight to look at; it was the face of a man who has deliberately choked himself to death by slow strangulation —which is what even the most skilful of self-hangings amounts to. His hands were handcuffed in front of his body. On the kitchen table, weighted down by a long, sharp bread knife, lay some sheets of paper, the top one inscribed:

"*Detective Inspector Kingsley Hylton.*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"DEAR INSPECTOR,—I am sorry for all the official flapdoodle there will be about this business, but I think you will agree with me, when you have read this, that it was the only way out—at least the only way out for me, and I've always been a bit of an egotist in life. I'm sorry, too, for any disgrace it brings on the Force; not that I've got any ideals left about the Force, or about anything else for that matter, but I like a job of work to be well done.

"I don't know whether you are beginning to guess it or not, but I killed Arthur Burdett; an action for which I wasn't sorry at the time, but which I am inclined to regret now. You may as well hear all the story, and as I don't know how long they will keep you over Morechester I'll get it down without any trimmings.

"Burdett was not only a miser but a roué as well. I had reason to think some time ago that he got various women up to the Court on one pretext or another and then had as much of an affair as he could with them, but it had nothing to do with me and so I didn't take much notice. But lately he had his eye on my wife; twice he rang her up when he knew I was away and asked her to go up there to take a message for me—of course, it was all make believe

about the message, but the first time she went up to see what it was he wanted and because she didn't wish to fall foul of him.

"I thought, until to-day, that that was why she went up there on the second and subsequent occasions, but I know differently now.

"It so happened that the second time she was there (or at any rate the second time I know of) I was on some of his land beyond Nyeton, seeing about a tree that had blown across the road and that had to be cleared away. I called at the Court on my way back, and as luck would have it ran into Alice just as she was leaving. I had no idea she was there (she hadn't said a word to me then about going up the previous time); she looked a bit upset and flushed, and, I suppose, she was frightened at seeing me there. Anyway when we got home that evening she told me that he had rung her up on an excuse of having some message for me and asked her up, and when she had got there there was no more talk about any message, he sat her down to tea and ended up by trying to make love to her. I suppose now that she told me all these half-lies because she was thoroughly scared by my turning up there unexpectedly and was afraid that I already knew something.

"Well, I wasn't going to have anybody interfering with my property like that, much less a man like Arthur Burdett, who was lucky enough to be born on the comfortable side of things and already had all he wanted in life.

"I thought it over for a day and decided to go up

on Monday, when I knew his man would be out, to thrash the whole thing out with him and see where we stood. Of course then I still firmly believed all my wife had told me—more fool me. So as not to worry her (which makes me laugh now) I told her I was going out on my usual Nyeton round after poachers.

" Actually I went up to Enderton Court; I used the back drive so that nobody at the Lodge should see me, not because I then intended to do anything illegal, but simply because Lawson, at the Lodge, gossips like any old woman and I didn't want Alice's visits there and then mine to be talked about.

" I got to the Court at about five minutes to seven, I should think. I knocked on the front door, and the old miser came shuffling across the hall just like Lumsdale described. He opened the door as far as the chain would admit and peered out. I said, 'I want a word with you, Mr. Burdett, about a little matter.' I don't know whether he guessed what I had come for or not, but I suppose he couldn't very well refuse to see me; and anyway I might have been coming about half a dozen different official things. He hesitated a moment and then took the chain off and told me to come in. I followed him across the hall into that little study sort of place where he always used to sit. He looked like a sort of devil hunched up in that chair with the yellow light half illuminating him. Then, of course, I didn't have the slightest intention of killing him—the thought had never even entered my head.

" We sat down, and he croaked out, ' What do you want at this time of night? '

" I never intended to beat about the bush—this was man to man, not police sergeant to landed gentleman—so I asked him straight out what he was doing with my wife.

" He changed colour a bit at that; not that he was afraid; to give the old fool his due I don't believe he was ever afraid of anything in his life, but I suppose he realized I knew something and wasn't certain how much it was.

" He burst out into the usual torrent of abuse which he used whenever he lost his temper. What the hell did I mean, and how dare I have the bloody impudence, and all that sort of thing.

" Of course I took no notice of that, except perhaps that it made me even angrier than I was already. When he had run short of breath I told him quite quietly that my wife had complained of being decoyed up there under false pretences and of having been molested, and that unless he had some satisfactory explanation to give I intended to make an official case of it and prosecute him.

" I don't know even now whether I should have done that or not, but I had to make some sort of threat and open the conversation somehow.

" It was then that the whole atmosphere of the thing changed. He simply laughed at me, a sort of unclean, animal, derisive laughter which made my blood begin to boil. I didn't speak at all for the next ten minutes, he had it all his own way. He

told me, amongst a lot of other things, that if I really imagined my wife went up there unwillingly it was about the richest thing he had ever heard of; that his great difficulty had been to keep her away once he had first got her up there; that he knew well enough what I was after, that the whole thing was a plant—that I wanted money, and that I damn well wasn't going to get any of his; that Alice had got enough already, and that she'd give her body to anyone for a five pound note.

" You must imagine, Inspector, that all this didn't come out at once, as I've written it, but was mixed up with a stream of filth and abuse about Alice and myself which would have made any man see red.

" I couldn't stand it anyway, and when he said that about Alice giving her body to anyone for a five pound note I lost control of myself (damned fool that I was). I had my truncheon out before I knew what I was doing. I don't know whether he saw it or not, I think he was past seeing anything except a threat to his precious money; when he had said what he did about Alice he leaned across the table and spat at me. It all sounds damned silly and far off now, but then, in the mood I was in, I couldn't stand it. I had my hand on my truncheon as I've told you, and when he leaned forward and opened that scrawny mouth of his and sent his vile spittle on to me I hit him without knowing that I did it.

" It killed him at once. I hit him on the head,

which I didn't mean to do. In a sense you may say that I didn't mean to hit him at all; it all happened so quickly and under the stress of temper. However, all those things don't matter: I did hit him and killed him, and it was murder.

" I lost my head for a few minutes, and damned nearly turned tail and ran, leaving everything just as it was, but of course that soon passed. I knew nobody could have heard anything and I was certain no one had seen me going up the back drive. My truncheon was the first snag. The end of it where it hit him was all messed up with skin and blood and a bit of hair—rather unpleasant. Obviously I couldn't leave *that* behind; but I knew what importance would be attached to the question of *weapon* when the investigation started, and so I thought I would provide one to make it easy for everybody (in fact my mind in this matter worked just as you deduced Dale Shipley's would have worked if he had done Burdett in with that loaded stick of his). Those two Indian clubs took my eye so I jumped upon a chair and got one down (the second fell down with a hell of a clatter, it made me jump a foot, and I realized how nervy I was); of course the thing had to be done properly so I had to rub the end of the club pretty hard on Burdett's messed up head to give it the requisite effect on the end. You will understand now why it upset me a bit when you described young Shipley doing the very same thing; I must say that rather shook me.

"When that was finished I put the chair back in its place (the one I had stood on to get the clubs), carefully brushed off any evidences of it having been stood on and had a good look round.

"One club was on the floor and I picked it up and hung it on a nail in the wall. It just shows how mistaken a man can be about the state of his mind and how easy it must be for murderers to make silly mistakes; I could have sworn I was perfectly cool and collected and yet I never realized that I was putting that club back on its wrong nail; it just didn't enter my head. As a matter of fact I don't think it mattered; its only effect so far as I could see, was to mystify you a bit. I got my handkerchief out and wiped everything I could think of for finger-prints and then looked at my watch; it was 7.25 exactly. I spent five whole minutes searching that room to make sure I was leaving nothing behind, and I flatter myself I did that bit thoroughly. The old fool's safe was open and I didn't quite know what to do about that. I once thought of taking some money out to make it look as though robbery was the motive, but then the money would have to be disposed of somehow and on the whole I thought it better not to. That made it just after the half-hour when I left the house; I checked all the times carefully as I thought it might be useful to me.

"Half-way down the back drive I did exactly what you thought the murderer did: I struck my trun-

cheon well into the grass at the foot of the hedge and wiped all the mess off it. Then I slung it in place again and went on. I was pretty certain there wouldn't be anyone in the drive itself and when I got to the end of it I waited a moment or two—had a good look up and down the lane. As a matter of fact the odds are about fifty to one against anybody being there at that time of night and I needn't have worried much.

"There was no one about so I turned left-handed and made off sharply through the lanes to Nyeton village. I didn't go up into the woods, but I wanted someone in the village to see me to strengthen my story.

"I was back home by half-past eight and sat there pretending to read with my ears nailed to the door, as you may say.

"Just after nine it came.

"Lumsdale knocked. I let him in, and he told me his alarming news. I hope my face looked serious and official enough; I tried to make it so anyway, and I walked up with him to see the first murder of my life (but my second view of it!). Incidentally it really did make me laugh when you solemnly asked me if I had ever had anything to do with murderers!

"The more I thought it over the more I thought I was bound to be absolutely safe. To start with there wouldn't be any suspicion in my direction, and then I didn't see (I don't see now) how there could be the slightest shred of provable evidence against me.

"I want to make it clear, Inspector, that I didn't

want anybody else to be charged with the crime, but I didn't see how there could be any evidence to charge anyone else. I thought Lumsdale would be all right for an alibi, and I didn't think anyone else would come into it. Of course all my talk about having seen some rough characters in the place a day or two before was all eyewash. I didn't know anything about Shipley's quarrel with the old man, and I didn't like the way things began to pile up against him; I don't pretend to know what I should have done if the circumstantial evidence had gone on mounting against him the way it did. However, I haven't had to face that question, and I don't think there's much more to interest you in the case. I found out something this afternoon which changed my whole outlook. You feel a damned fool, Inspector, when you've jumped into the river to rescue someone and it turns out to be a dummy; I mean when you take risks and find that the person you take them for isn't worth it.

"I found out to-day that what Arthur Burdett said about my wife was absolutely true—so I needn't have killed him at all really, which is a pretty good joke on both of us when you come to think of it. Her one lover is hardly cold before she's off into the woods with another and playing wife to me all the time in between.

"Well, Inspector, that's the way of it. I knew it all before; shut my eyes to it and have had it proved abundantly again: Go your own way in life and trust yourself, nothing else is worth while.

"If you hadn't come in when you did this evening I should have killed the whore I am married to. You saved her, and much good that will do the world. I shan't kill her now, I couldn't very well hope to get away with that, and yet if I let her live she'll get me caught over the other thing; somehow or other in the devilish way women have in their minds *she knows*. I'm certain of that. Well, she won't have that pleasure. I've always lived life my own way and I'll go out of it my own way.

"When I have finished writing this (it's nearly done, so cheer up) I shall string myself up to the tie-rod that runs across the kitchen just above me now (funny to look up and choose the exact spot where you are going to hang yourself), then I shall handcuff my wrists so that I shan't be able to change my mind at the last moment, then I shall push the table away with my feet and hang there by the neck until I am dead, and may God (as they say in the legal flap-doodle) have Mercy on my Soul. Well, if you believe in a God, Inspector, and a Soul, good luck to you; and in any case I hope you get more out of life than I did—probably you will if you're not fool enough to marry.

"JAMES CLEWLEY WHITE.

"PS. I'm sorry we didn't have a third game of chess—I don't think you'd have beaten me though. It was circumstances and the woman that beat me, not you.

"J.C.W."

Inspector Kingsley Hylton read this remarkable and eminently lucid document through slowly and with a series of mingled feelings such as he had seldom, if ever, before experienced. When he had finished it to its last syllable, its last defiant initial, he gathered the loose sheets together and took them into the office, not caring particularly to share the company in the kitchen any longer.

In the office he read through the document once again; then he put it on one side, drew out and lit one of his thin black cigars, puffed out a cloud of smoke and made two reflections: one, that for a week he must have looked an utter and comically complete fool in the eyes of James Clewley White; and two, that on the whole he was getting pretty tired of Hope Enderton and all its inhabitants.

He felt that he would be more than pleased to hand the whole damned thing over to the locals at Morechester, and he reached out for the telephone to tell them so. But he paused, and for an unprofessional moment his thoughts went back to what hung lifeless, colding, grotesque in the other room; what had been the man Sergeant James Clewley White, proud, self-dependent, reserved, sardonic; fooled by life to the top of his bent; as good material as was ever baked wrong in the unkind oven of life. . . .

"Poor devil," Hylton thought with compassion, and baring his head for a second he prayed that the Giver and Sustainer of all life would look kindly on

the man who had wasted his portion . . . then lifting up the receiver he asked in a weary voice for the Morechester Police Station.

~~A very~~

A very very good book.

THE END

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